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The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

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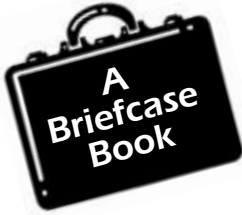
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The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

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Preface

Nobody knows when the first meeting took place or why, but it's a safe bet that the meeting seemed too long to some participants, poorly organized to others, boring to at least a few, and it's likely that some were disappointed with the results.

Every meeting you hold costs time and money—sometimes a lot. Consider this book an investment to improve the return on the time you and your team spend in meetings. Properly planned and conducted meetings can help you and all your employees work together in a more efficient and coordinated fashion.

I believe that if you follow the basic principles and guidelines presented in this book, you'll find it easy to improve your meetings, and you and your people will find them not time-wasters but performance enhancers.

As we use the term “meeting” in this book, it's an event consisting of people, content, and process designed for a purpose. There are many types of meetings that you as a manager might organize and/or facilitate, involving primarily your employees, but perhaps including other employees and managers and even people from outside the organization. With this reality in mind, we frame our discussions in general terms, focusing on what all or most meetings have in common. We also use the word “participants” to refer generally to the people who take part in a meeting. This word suggests an active participation, because we believe that people should be involved in a meeting, not just be there in attendance.

This book will take you step by step through the meeting process. Chapter 1 reviews the factors that cause meetings to be

[For more information about this title, click here.](#)

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Meetings: The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

A meeting is an event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose—who, what, how, and why. Traditionally, there was also a time and a place—when and where—but as technology allows us to meet virtually (the subject of Chapter 8), these secondary aspects may become less important.

There are many types of meetings, depending on the people, content, process, and purpose. Because a meeting is basically a collaborative work process, the word “meeting” encompasses almost as many possibilities as the word “work” itself. In this book we’ll discuss meetings in general terms, focusing on what all or most collaborative meetings have in common.

We’ll also use the term “participants” to refer generally to the people who take part in a meeting. A term sometimes used—“attendees”—is not only an incorrect formation (because it would mean “people attended by someone or something”) but, more importantly, it suggests a passive presence. We believe that people should be involved in a collaborative meet-



Meeting An event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose.

Because a meeting is basically a collaborative work process, the word “meeting” encompasses almost as many possibilities as the word “work” itself.

ing, not just be there.

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

When Charles Dickens used those words to begin *A Tale of Two Cities*, he

wasn't writing about meetings, of course. And yet, it seems appropriate to begin discussing meetings in terms of extremes. We've all attended meetings that were “the best of times,” that energized the participants, promoted teamwork, and generated important results. And, unfortunately, we've all attended meetings that were “the worst of times.” What makes the difference? That's the focus of this chapter. And the objective of this book is to help you make that difference.

The Worst (of) Meetings

Here's a checklist of some common complaints about meetings. Check each that applies to your meetings:

- ☐ People invited to a meeting don't show up.
- ☐ People arrive late and/or leave early.



Smart Managing

It's Only Words

Does it matter whether you call people who meet “participants” or “attendees” or something else? Yes, according to Lani Arredondo, in *Communicating Effectively* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000, p. 151):

In every type of meeting, think of those present not as employees or attendees, but as *participants*. Doing so encourages you to engage the employees.

It also encourages people to take more seriously their responsibility to contribute to the meeting.

Even if you believe that “it's only words,” that what you call people at a meeting is just semantics, it's a no-lose situation to call them *participants*.

- ☐ People doodle, think about things they could be doing, or even doze off.
- ☐ Too many people talk at once.
- ☐ The meeting is dominated by one person or several people.
- ☐ The meeting is dominated by the leader.
- ☐ People get into personal attacks.
- ☐ Nothing gets accomplished.
- ☐ The meeting rehashes topics discussed at previous meetings.
- ☐ Meetings take too long and accomplish too little.
- ☐ People leave expressing relief: "The meeting's finally over. We can finally get back to work."
- ☐ Meetings don't get any better; managers and employees are stuck in a rut of bad meetings.

A meeting can go bad for many reasons. The following lists present many of the general causes for bad meetings. You probably recognize most or even all of these problems—and maybe you could add to these lists.

Sometimes problems start *in advance of a meeting*:

- because it's held for the wrong reason or no reason at all
- because of poor or even no preparation
- because of the people invited—and the people not invited
- because of unclear roles and responsibilities
- because the participants don't know what to expect or how to prepare
- because the manager and/or the participants don't bring necessary resources
- because of the place
- because of the timing

Sometimes problems start *as a meeting begins*:

- because it starts wrong
- because the manager tries to be responsible for everything

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- because participants aren't focused on the business of the meeting
- because participants don't get sufficiently and appropriately involved
- because it's not considered to be "real work"
- because of bad attitudes about meetings
- because of low expectations for meetings

Sometimes problems arise *during a meeting*:

- because discussions get off track
- because it takes too much time to do anything
- because of distractions
- because people hesitate to contribute—or they contribute hesitantly
- because people get into conflicts over nothing—or they do nothing in order to avoid conflicts
- because the group can't make decisions

Sometimes problems come *as a meeting ends*:

- because it ends abruptly, with no sense of conclusion or closure
- because the participants are unsure about what the meeting has accomplished
- because it ends without any plans for action
- because nobody knows who's responsible for doing what
- because the participants leave feeling disappointed or frustrated about something that could have gone better
- because participants have contributed without any recognition for their work

Sometimes problems develop *after a meeting*:

- because the effort put into the meeting seems to go nowhere after it ends
- because the people responsible for assignments fail to complete them
- because of all the other bad meetings that preceded it—

people don't take meetings seriously and so don't commit to the outcomes

Whew! With all of those potential problems, it's not really surprising that so many meetings fail in some respects.

The Impact of Bad Meetings

The effects of those problems, the results of those failures, can be serious—for you, your people, and the organization. There are some very good reasons why a smart manager does whatever it takes to make meetings *better*.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for You

When meetings don't work well, you're not maximizing the potential of your people and you're not making the best use of time and energy. That means you've got to work harder to make up for the bad meetings—and you're likely to need more and/or longer meetings in order to produce results.

A meeting is a microcosm of the workplace, a type of project in which you show your ability to manage people, time, and resources—for better or for worse. And as more and more of what organizations do takes place in teams, meetings become the setting in which more of the really important work gets done—or in which more time and energy are wasted.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for Your People

Your employees are negatively affected by bad meetings in many of the same ways you are.

After all, the meetings are wasting their time and energy. Consequently, they have less time to do their other work, which causes frustration—for them and for coworkers who depend on them.

But they also become frustrated by the meetings, because nobody likes to be ineffective and inefficient! (On the other hand, some may decide that if it's acceptable for a group to be ineffective and inefficient, it's OK for individuals, too.) Of course, it's likely that your employees will have concerns about the inability

**Treat Meetings Like Work!**

Perhaps the single most effective way to improve meetings is to make sure that everyone treats every meeting like any other essential work activity. Every meeting participant should arrive knowing what the group is going to do, aware of what's expected of him or her, and prepared to contribute to the best of his or her ability.

of their manager to improve the meetings.

Bad meetings affect morale. Some of your employees will become frustrated by their coworkers. Collaboration can energize employees—or enervate and annoy them. Some employees may become apathetic and not take meetings seriously;

they may miss meetings, arrive late, and spend a lot of time doodling. Others may become negative, pessimistic, skeptical, cynical—and those attitudes are hard to leave behind when the meeting ends.

Bad Meetings Are Bad for the Organization

Now take those bad effects on your employees and on you and multiply them by the number of managers and employees in your organization.

In the short term, bad meetings waste time, talent, and other resources. Inefficient meetings cost organizations billions of dollars each year in lost time and lost opportunities. But those are just the measurable costs.

Bad meetings affect the climate and the culture of an organization as well. And, if word gets outside the walls, there could be damage to the image and the reputation of the organization. After all, bad management is bad management—in meetings and in other areas of a business. (It's that "meeting as microcosm" concept again.)

Bad Meetings Are Bad for Your Career

Beyond the negative effects of meetings outlined above, there's one more that could be huge—the effect on your career. Again, the meeting is a microcosm of the workplace. As we noted earlier, a meeting is a type of project—a project in which you show

Bad Meetings Make Bad Companies

“Meetings matter because that’s where an organization’s culture perpetuates itself. Meetings are how an organization says, ‘You are a member.’ So if every day we go to boring meetings full of boring people, then we can’t help but think that this is a boring company. Bad meetings are a source of negative messages about our company and ourselves.”

That thought-provoking comment comes from William R. Daniels, senior consultant at American Consulting & Training of San Rafael, California, who has introduced meeting-improvement techniques to companies (quoted by Eric Matson in “The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings,” *Fast Company*, April 1996).



how you manage. If you do meetings well, people recognize your abilities as a manager. If you have problems with meetings, it’s generally obvious to your employees—and to others in the organization and maybe beyond.

The skill to manage a meeting—to develop ideas, to motivate people and to move people and ideas to positive action—is perhaps the most critical asset in any career.... Most professionals have had no real training in devising and managing an effective meeting; in fact, most professionals do not recognize the enormous impact their meetings have on their organizations and their careers.

That’s how George David Kieffer summed up the discussions he had with “some of America’s most successful and respected leaders in business, labor, industry, education, and government” in *The Strategy of Meetings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988, p. 13).

He devotes 50 pages of his book to the importance of meetings for careers. In brief, to succeed as a manager, you have to manage meetings.

The Best (of) Meetings

Managers often fail to maximize on the potential of meetings. They waste valuable opportunities—for themselves, for their

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employees, and for the organization. Here are just some of the many possible benefits to be derived through meetings:

- You can share information—and learn from your employees—in a setting that allows and even encourages interaction.
- You can answer questions.
- You can ask questions.
- You can discuss important issues and reach decisions as a group.
- You can direct and coordinate the individual and joint efforts of your employees.
- You can help your employees develop their abilities to think critically.
- You can draw upon the experiences of your employees and others.
- You can get your employees to raise questions and identify problems.
- You can gain perspectives on an issue.
- You can observe how your employees interact.
- You can help your employees work better as a team.
- You can display and develop many of your managerial skills.
- You can promote a sense of community.

Make a Difference

We've briefly considered the differences between bad meetings and good meetings. But the difference that concerns us in the rest of this book is *you*. You can be the difference between bad meetings and good meetings.

You've already committed to improving your meetings by starting to read this book. We hope that you will read it to the end—and make use of it.

This book will take you step by step through the meeting process:

Chapter 2 outlines and discusses the details of preparing for a meeting.

Chapter 3 explains how to start a meeting, including setting rules and assigning roles and responsibilities.

Chapter 4 offers suggestions for conducting a meeting.

Chapter 5 explains how to close a meeting and follow up on the results.

Chapter 6 describes a selection of techniques and tools for helping meeting participants work together more effectively and efficiently.

Chapter 7 presents common problems with meetings and ways to deal with them.

Chapter 8 discusses the use of technological tools and the issues involved in meeting virtually (online).

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

- ☐ Meetings can energize the participants, promote teamwork, and generate important results—or waste time and money and cause serious problems. As manager, you make the difference between good meetings and bad.
- ☐ Meetings can go bad for many reasons. Problems can develop in advance of the meeting, as the meeting begins, during the meeting, as the meeting ends, or after the meeting—and virtually all can be prevented.
- ☐ Bad meetings are bad for you as a manager, for your employees, for your organization, and for your career.
- ☐ Good meetings allow you and your employees to discuss important issues and reach decisions together, encourage your employees to develop their abilities to think critically, draw upon the experiences of your employees and others, help your employees work better as a team, and promote a sense of community.



Preparing for a Meeting

Any meeting worth holding is worth planning. The only exception to this rule is impromptu meetings. Although it's sometimes necessary to call a meeting with little or no notice, you should avoid doing so routinely, for the following reasons:

- Such meetings can be an imposition on the people you call together.
- Every impromptu meeting promotes the perception that you don't expect participants to prepare for meetings.
- The results can be disappointing, because, without a plan, the meeting can veer off track.

We've all attended meetings that seemed to have been “just thrown together”—and the results are often mediocre at best: confusion, frustration, conflicts, disappointment, and time and energy wasted. In the oft-quoted words of Benjamin Franklin, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

It's true that sometimes it's impossible to prepare adequately. Sometimes something comes up suddenly that necessitates gath-

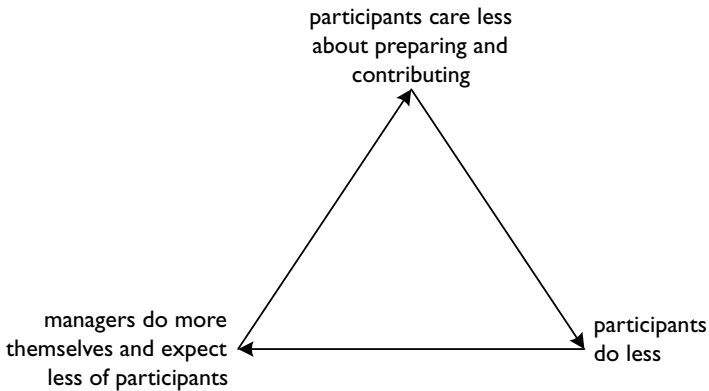


Figure 2-1. Cycle of bad meetings

ering at least briefly. But you've got to avoid allowing one bad meeting to be followed by another. That's because bad meetings usually lead to worse meetings, as shown in Figure 2-1.

The result of this downward cycle is that everybody tends to develop a fatalistic attitude toward meetings—and that can be a tough attitude to break. So, bad meetings usually lead to worse meetings.

The reverse is also true: good meetings often lead to better meetings. And good meetings start in advance—with good preparation.

Develop the Agenda

Whether you've got one purpose for meeting or several, you need to answer the following questions for each purpose in order to develop an agenda:

- What do you want to do?
- How should the pieces of the meeting be sequenced most effectively and efficiently?
- Who should attend? Which parts of the meeting? Why is each person necessary?



Agenda A plan for a meeting. We're all familiar with the term and the basic definition. But sometimes managers start off target, by thinking of an agenda simply as "a list of things to cover."

It's useful, then, to keep in mind the origin of this word. It's the plural of the Latin word *agendum*, which means "something to be done," from the verb that gives us our word "act." In other words, an agenda is a *plan consisting of action points*.

Go Solo or as a Team

As you start planning for a meeting, there's a decision to make: do you go it alone or do you involve others?

Many managers prepare for meetings alone, primarily because it's easier—especially if they have only a few minutes here and there to spend on preparing—or because they feel that it's their responsibility as managers.

But it's easy to involve others, even minimally. Toward the end of each meeting, the facilitator can elicit suggestions for the agendas of future meetings.

Preparing as a group presents the following advantages:

- You can take advantage of the creativity and critical thinking of your employees.
- You can encourage your employees to take greater ownership of meetings.
- You can help your employees develop their leadership skills.
- You can delegate some of the preparation.

Working as a group takes more planning and time, but the benefits will be worth the extra investment. If the meeting is to be simple and focused, you can plan with just one or two people.

There are several ways to choose the people to help plan:

- By their strengths: organizational, interpersonal, analytical, creative, logical, etc.
- By their positions within your unit, to represent task areas or functions.

- By their social connections with other employees in your unit and perhaps in other units.

If someone other than yourself will be facilitating the meeting, you should also involve him or her in planning it.

By the way, it's not necessary to invite the planners to the meeting. The people who are best at planning a meeting are not necessarily the ones who should attend the meeting.

Finally, even if you choose to plan the meeting alone, you might benefit from distributing a draft agenda to participants and inviting reactions. Not only will you improve your agenda because of the input, but the participants will have a sense of ownership and will be able to prepare for the meeting.

Determine Your Purpose

Your preparation should start with determining your purpose. What do you want the meeting to do? If you don't have a purpose, don't hold a meeting. It's as simple as this: when it is not necessary to hold a meeting, it is necessary to not hold a meeting.

Determining your purpose involves more than just answering the question, "Why are you meeting?" After all, you could answer that question "Because we always meet on Monday morning" (the "same time, same place" logic) or "Because it's been a month since we had a meeting." Neither of those answers provides a *purpose*—other than that you would be meeting for the purpose of meeting. That line of reasoning leads to mediocre meetings, because it doesn't guide or inspire your preparation.

If meetings are not required by organizational policy or a mandate from the top, set a rule for your-

Don't Waste Your Time and Energy



If you don't have purpose enough for a meeting, you can never do enough planning to compensate. The result would be only a well-planned waste of time and energy.

As economist John Maynard Keynes noted, "If a thing is not worth doing, it is not worth doing well."

self: justify each and every meeting. Your touchstone should be that basic question—What do you want the meeting to do?

Is a Meeting the Best Way?

The next step is to answer another question: Is a meeting the best way to do what you have to do? Does it require involving other people? If so, in what way(s)?

There are basically two kinds of meetings:

- *Participatory* meetings, which need input from group members
- *Nonparticipatory* meetings, which are mostly one-way communication—*informational* and *motivational*

All meetings would fit somewhere on a continuum, with the extremes being either totally unilateral communication or totally open and active participation. This perspective provides a rough guide to help you decide whether to hold a meeting or to find an alternative:

- If the purpose suggests that it would be a *presented, informational* meeting, then you might want to consider alternatives for getting that information out. At the very least, think about ways to keep it short and/or make it interest-



Time-Wasters

Management consultant James Champy warns against the following types of meetings that he labels as “time-wasters” (“Wasteful Meetings,” *Forbes*, Nov. 2, 1998):

“Progress reports”

“Beauty pageants”: Presentations intended to please managers

“Informational meetings”

“Foreign policy meetings”: Where people from various units gather “to enact business rituals”

“Planning meetings”: Where the planning never ends and turns into action

This warning may be too categorical, since progress reports, informational meetings, and planning meetings can be valuable, even vital. Just don't let them become routine.

ing. A talking head is not a meeting.

- If the purpose suggests that it would be a *presented, motivational* meeting, then start planning—but keep it short. Inspiration is usually best served in smaller doses.
- If the purpose suggests that it would be a *participatory* meeting of any type, then you should schedule the meeting—but think carefully about the methods and the people you invite. (These two dimensions we'll consider a little later in this chapter.)

As a famous person (the comment has been attributed to Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Douglas MacArthur) once noted, “No generalization is worth a damn, including this one!” That's only too true: for any generalization, there's at least one exception—and so too for our generalization about informational meetings.

Sometimes a purpose that might not justify a meeting under ordinary circumstances could be sufficient reason in certain situations. Let's take as an example a company with a tradition of applying the “mushroom theory of management” to its employees (“Keep them in the dark, cover them with ____, and, when they raise their heads, cut them off!”). In such an environment, you might be right to hold meetings to provide information and/or hold discussions—to empower your employees and improve morale—although you should limit the length and/or frequency of such meetings.

But every meeting should be special. Every meeting should interest participants by its purpose and the opportunity to make a difference. That's rarely the case for regular meetings, those events that are held at the same time on the same day with (usually) the same people, as much a part of the schedule as lunch, but far less rewarding.

The value of holding meetings regularly may be overrated. Regular meetings tend to become routine. Routine activities tend to become boring, even tedious (it's no coincidence that the word *routine* seems to have derived from the same source

as the word *rut!*) or an occasion to socialize. When participants approach a meeting with apathy or even ennui, you'll be working harder and getting less out of your meetings.

Organizations now have more alternatives to face-to-face meetings than ever before. The purpose of many meetings, in whole or in part, is to share information, to make reports, and to provide updates. If possible, try to replace these meetings—or at least reduce the information load—by using e-mail or memos.

Using these other media to share information will save time for everyone and spare those who feel compelled to take copious notes from risking writer's cramp. Also, since few people can take accurate and comprehensive notes or remember every fact in an oral presentation, you're avoiding mistakes and misunderstandings by providing information in writing. (Just be sure to check your facts and your spelling—and make your e-mails or memos easy to read. Long paragraphs consisting of long sentences tend to daunt all but the most enthusiastic.)

Another type of alternative to conventional meetings is *virtual* meetings. We'll discuss these options in Chapter 8.

Set Your Goals

So, you have a purpose for a meeting, one or more things that you cannot do more effectively and efficiently through some other means. Next, you need to decide on your goals, the outcomes toward which the meeting will be directed. That's how you'll measure whether the meeting has succeeded or failed: did you achieve your goals?

Your goals don't need to be fancy. For each thing that you want the meeting to do, you should write a short statement of what you expect to achieve.

For example:

- If your purpose is to discuss expanding your services, your goal might be to create a list of five specific services to study.
- If your purpose is to debate three proposals for cutting

costs, your goal might be to decide on one of the three and develop a policy for implementing it.

- If your purpose is to work on improving workflow, your goal might be to determine the five areas with the most serious problems and to assign people to work to address the causes of each.

Once your purpose is clear, list the *topics* and then the method(s) for handling each topic.

Decide on Your Methods

For each purpose and the goals that you set you should choose an appropriate method. That seems only logical—but the logic is often neglected and misunderstood.

Michael Begeman, manager of the 3M Meeting Network, views meetings in terms of what he calls “conversations” (“You Have to Start Meeting Like This!” Gina Imperato, *Fast Company*, April 1999). He distinguishes three basic conversations:

- “Conversation for possibility”—to maximize creativity and generate ideas
- “Conversation for opportunity”—to narrow down a field of options, through discussing, sharing information, analyzing, taking positions
- “Conversation for action”—to make a decision and commit to taking action

Another way to think about these dynamics is in terms of three stages:

- Open
- Narrow
- Close

Your approach should be appropriate to your “conversation” and your purposes and goals and to the specifics of your circumstances. You should communicate your intent (purpose, goal, and method) in your agenda and then enforce the spirit of

that “conversation” during the meeting.

If the participants don't understand the purpose, the goal, and the approach, they will be working in different directions, for different reasons. Here are two scenarios:

- You want to hold a “conversation for possibility” to generate a few ideas, but you don't make that intent clear. You put on the agenda only “discuss ideas.” The result: some participants will be brainstorming, others will be shooting down their ideas, and still others may be trying to rush one of those ideas to a vote.
- You want to hold a “conversation for action” to vote on three proposals, but you don't make that intent clear. You put on the agenda only “talk about proposals.” The result: a few participants insist on making additional proposals and others suggest forming a task force to gather more information on the proposals—activities that frustrate those who were expecting to reach a decision and then move on it.

We'll consider methods, techniques, and tools for “conversations for possibility” and “conversations for opportunity” in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In a moment we'll outline ways to reach decisions in “conversations for action.”

But first we should touch upon something essential for any of the three “conversations”—*information*. You should frame every discussion in a context of information. That means designating someone to provide information and naming the person(s) responsible on the agenda.

There are various ways to provide information, either in advance (distributed with the agenda) or during the meeting (brief comments, a presentation, questions and answers). How the information is provided depends, of course, on what and how much information the meeting participants will need to know in order to discuss most effectively and efficiently and, if they are entrusted with making a decision, to decide wisely. In other words, the information to be provided should be determined by the purposes, the desired outcomes, and the knowl-

edge and experience of the participants. Later in this chapter, we'll discuss ways of providing information.

Deciding on Decisions

Sometimes *how* you decide may be just as important as *what* you decide. The process used to make a decision affects how people feel about the decision.

If you don't care how your employees feel and if you don't need their support for the decision and their commitment to acting on it, then you don't need to care about how the decision is made. However, if that's not the case, then you should think about how you want to make any decision you put on the agenda.

There are four basic ways to make decisions:

- Managerial—you make the call!
- Vote by majority or plurality—just count the votes
- Consensus—a result that all participants can support
- Delegation—selected members of the group make the decision

Here are some things to keep in mind as you choose and use any of these four methods of making decisions.

Managerial. Managers should not feel compelled to use voting or consensus to make all decisions in meetings. Sometimes it's more appropriate—and certainly more efficient—to exercise your managerial authority. But if an issue is worth considering and discussing in a meeting, be clear about the purpose for discussing it.

Decisions can be placed along a continuum, between totally managerial and totally delegated. In "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern" (*Harvard Business Review*,



Consensus The cooperative development of a decision that all members of the group understand and can accept and agree to support. In decision-making by consensus, every member has the power to block any decision until the group has addressed his or her concerns satisfactorily.

March-April 1958, reprinted May-June 1973), Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H. Schmidt present a “continuum of leadership behavior” that outlines seven modes for making decisions. Figure 2-2 shows a version of this continuum.

Mode I	Mode II	Mode III	Mode IV	Mode V	Mode VI	Mode VII
Manager: I make the decision and announce it to you.	Manager: I make the decision and explain it to you.	Manager: I make the decision and discuss implementation issues.	Manager: I make a tentative decision and discuss it with you before implementing.	Manager: We discuss the problem and/or your recommendation first, then I make the decision.	Manager: I delegate the decision to you with limits.	Manager: I delegate the entire decision to the full limits of my authority.

Figure 2-2. Decision-making modes

You should at least consider making a decision yourself, using any discussion as exploratory and advisory, under certain conditions.

Vote by Majority or Plurality. This is the usual concept of voting: one choice receives more votes than any others. (We'll consider another type of voting—multivoting—in Chapter 6.) If there's only one choice (yes or no) or there are only two choices (A or B), then the decision is by majority, since either one or the other—yes or no, A or B—gains more than 50% of the votes cast. If there are three or more choices, then the option gaining

more votes than any of the others has the plurality and wins.

Generally, if we consider only the choice that wins, whether it's a *majority* or a *plurality* is merely a technicality. (We've all heard at least once the triumphant cry after children vote on something—“Majority rules!” The fact



You Make the Decision

- When you're meeting with subordinates about budgets, personnel policies, or matters that involve other managers
- When situations involve information that you can't share
- When decisions require information that employees lack and that would take too much time to provide

that it's sometimes "Plurality rules!" wouldn't mean much to those whose choice won—and probably very little to those who voted otherwise.)

Traditionally, many groups have made decisions by voting. This method makes sense under the following conditions:

- The time is limited.
- There are significant differences among the members.
- It's more important to move forward than to resolve differences.
- Sufficient time is allowed for discussion before voting.
- The members consider and evaluate a number of options.
- Members have limited skills in communication and decision-making.
- You don't need the support of all members to implement the decision.
- There are significant differences among the members and it's obvious that consensus in the time allowed is very unlikely.
- It's more important to move forward than to resolve differences.
- Sufficient time is allowed for discussion before voting, so members of the group are all equally informed on the issue and understand each other's perspectives.
- The members consider and evaluate a number of options.
- The members have limited skills in communication and decision-making.
- It seems that the majority can act on the decision without the active involvement or support of the minority and there's a way to keep members of the minority from reacting negatively to the decision.

Consensus. Consensus—the cooperative development of a decision that's acceptable enough for all members of a group to agree to support—is the quintessential team approach to making decisions. Over the last decade or so, the idea of making decisions by consensus has become more established in business.

Participants in consensus own the decision, as opposed to managerial decisions. There are no “winners” and “losers,” and no undermining the decision, as opposed to decisions by vote.

The reality is that it can take a long time to achieve consensus. And in practice the process of decision by consensus can fall far short of ideal, because it's often not *true* consensus. When personalities and group dynamics and the pressure to conform come into play, consensus can be harder on some people than either of the other two ways of making a decision.

The goal of consensus is to take multiple perspectives into account and craft a decision robust enough to address concerns. The outcome is that every participant really understands and can explain the decision and support it. Consensus is definitely the best way to go with some decisions. And generally groups become better at the process with experience.

Delegation. A fourth option is to delegate the decision to a subgroup. This is a good option particularly when

these are the individuals generally considered best qualified to make the decision or when they're the only people affected by the decision.



Use Consensus ...

- When decisions are important and/or far-reaching in their effects.
- When the exchange of ideas and perspectives would enrich the group.
- When all or most members of the group are equally invested in the decision and are necessary to take action on it.

Adapted from *The Team Handbook*, p. 4-22.

Put It on the Agenda

For each decision on the agenda, indicate “vote” or “consensus” or “managerial” or “delegation.” That's a simple way to let participants know in advance

what to expect. By being clear and up-front about the method of making a decision, you help focus the conversation.

Allocate Time

The general rule is that “regular” meetings should last no longer

than 90 minutes. If possible, you should limit meetings to one hour.

This depends, of course, on the purpose of the meeting. Some meetings are best scheduled for a half day or a full day, such as annual planning, strategic planning, and project reviews.

If you go beyond an hour or 90 minutes, allow breaks—at least five to ten minutes, depending on such practical factors as the number of participants, the capacity of the restrooms, and the distance from the meeting site to the restrooms.

Indicate a length of time for each item on your agenda. There are at least four good reasons to do so:

1. When you think about the time necessary for each item, one by one, you'll estimate the total time more accurately.
2. When participants know how much time you expect to allow for each item, they're likely to be more conscious of the time and more efficient.
3. When you know how long each item should take, you'll proceed through the agenda with more confidence, feeling more in control.
4. When you've allotted a time for each item, it's easier to skip an item if you fall behind schedule—or to allow a little more time for an item if necessary.

Avoid the Tyranny of 12 and 6



Don't get caught up on halves and wholes. Many managers will automatically allocate either 30 minutes or a full hour when scheduling a meeting, simply because these units of time are common and expected. Schedule a 40-minute meeting if you've got only 40 minutes' worth of work to do. Don't feel pressured to fill an hour. In fact, in some cases, 10 minutes may be all you need—and you can pack a lot of productivity into that time.

For each item, put a start time, a duration, and a stop time. And then break each item into components and indicate start times, durations, and stop times for those components. For example, if the item is "Decide on the best marketing strategy for launching the new and improved Super Widget," you might



There's Really No Trick

It's a fact of human nature that people tend to take specifics more serious than generalities.

Why? In part, at least, because specifics show that you've thought more about what you want to accomplish and how. So, let your agenda show what you're thinking—and if the results aren't very specific, maybe you should think some more.

break the item into three components—provide information, discuss options, and vote—and indicate a time allotment for each.

Putting down start and stop times provides structure—and makes the job of the timekeeper easier. Putting down durations

allows the timekeeper to adjust the schedule if the group falls behind or goes ahead of the schedule.

Keep in mind that participatory activities, particularly if they involve more creativity and/or more emotional involvement, can vary greatly in time, depending on the following factors:

- Number of people
- Time of day
- Mood (even of only one or a few participants)

Sometimes participants are “in the zone” and contributions come fast and furious; other times, it's like their minds are mired in molasses. You can't predict how people are going to work together: sometimes there's synergy, sometimes lethargy or antagonism.

It's generally best to allow a little extra time for participatory activities, just in case things don't work out as you hope, and allow a lot of time for consensus decisions. Then, if you get lucky, you can do a little more or just end the meeting sooner on a high note.

Finally, if any participants are coming from outside your unit or the organization, you might want to add a little time at the start for introductions—and maybe for any activities where cultural differences may affect interactions.

Sequence the Items

The next decision is how to sequence the pieces of the meeting most effectively and efficiently. It may be that there's a certain natural flow of the items that just makes sense. If not, then you've got choices. You can alternate the agenda items in terms of any or all of these aspects:

- Difficulty: hard vs. easy
- Time: long vs. short
- Energy: intensive vs. light
- Emotions: hot vs. cool

Structure the agenda to keep the meeting from bogging down or diverging and the participants from heating up or burning out. That may not always be possible, of course, but it's worth the effort. When the agenda is structured so the facilitator can vary the pace, it's easier to maintain attention and sustain involvement.

Of course, you're not relying only on the structure of the agenda to keep your meetings in order. You've also got your meeting ground rules to help things run more smoothly. (We'll discuss ground rules in Chapter 3.) If you don't have meeting ground rules, that should be the first item on your agenda. It may take 10 or 15 minutes, perhaps even longer, but the time is definitely well invested in terms of establishing guidelines for interaction and developing a spirit of community.

After you've sequenced your business items, you plan the ending. Shakespeare was stretching a point when he had a character observe (twice) that "all's well that ends well" in his play to which he gave that title. Yet, it's important to end a meeting properly. That means allotting 5 to 10 minutes or so to sum up the main points, the decisions, and the assignments, and to evaluate the meeting.

We'll go into these activities in detail in Chapter 5. Here, we'll just note that you should treat the summary and the evaluation as you would any other items on the agenda. You don't



Don't Start with Blah, Blah, Blah

Managers often sequence announcements as the first item on their agendas. This is, in general, a bad strategy for at least five reasons:

1. It may lessen the initial feeling of community, unless all of the announcements are relevant to all of the participants.
2. It may distract participants from the purpose(s) of the meeting and the agenda.
3. It sends the message that it's not important to arrive on time.
4. It starts the meeting wrong, with a one-way flow of information. That can make the transition into collaboration more difficult.
5. It suggests that you don't realize there are better ways to make announcements than at a meeting.

need to specify desired outcome(s), but you should indicate a start time, a duration, and a stop time.



Prevent the "Parkinson Puff"

Set a time for the meeting to end.

Do you recognize the name Cyril Northcote Parkinson? Probably not, but you most likely know his law—"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." That's certainly true for meetings.

Set a time for the meeting to end.

Setting a stop time for the meeting encourages the participants to work more efficiently, to not go off on tangents. (It's usually unwise, however, to be rigid about the stop time. We'll consider this issue in Chapter 4.)

Who Should Meet?

We're all familiar with the adage, "The more the merrier." That seems to be the principle by which many managers decide who should attend their meetings. That's great for a party, but not for a business meeting.

It seems to make more sense to follow this principle: "The length of a meeting rises with the square of the number of people present." So, be stingy with your invitations. Invite only those people necessary to achieve the goal(s) of the meeting.

That advice makes sense, but how do you apply it?

Perhaps the best way is by asking one question about everybody you're considering inviting—How do you expect this person to contribute to the meeting? Be specific. Could you explain to this person what you expect from him or her? If you don't know how you expect the person to contribute, maybe you shouldn't include him or her.

If it would make sense to invite some people for only part of the meeting, then do so. If you schedule the items on the agenda with start and stop times and you keep to that schedule, you can have participants show up for one part of the meeting, then leave for the rest. It's generally better to lose a few minutes of meeting time to the disruption of people arriving and leaving than to keep people in the meeting when they are not yet or no longer necessary.

Sure, that may sound harsh. And yes, it's natural to not want to exclude people from a meeting. But it's a balancing act between ensuring a fully democratic process and making the most of the time. Compromise, by appointing or letting employees appoint representatives. You can shorten meetings and reduce the number of participants, so you save time—and money.

You can designate an individual to represent a group of his or her peers. Then, he or she is responsible for discussing the agenda with the others and eliciting comments, suggestions, concerns, and so forth to present at the meeting. (If any employees or other managers question this method of holding meetings, you need only refer them to the U.S. Congress. Certainly nobody would expect 260,000,000 Americans to meet in Washington, D.C. to deliberate and make decisions!)

Maybe you truly believe that more can be better, depending on the purpose of the meeting. There's some truth to that argument—although maybe not enough to prove that you should include everyone in the meeting.

Do you want to share some information? You can often do so at least as effectively and efficiently by another means. It



Practice the Project Principle

If you're unsure about whom to invite to a meeting, here's a suggestion. Think of the meeting as a very short-term project. You know the outcome that you expect. Think of your employees as a pool of potential temporary workers. Whom would you hire for the duration of the project?

When you think in terms of a meeting as being real work, a project that will require commitment and collaboration from all, it's easier to select members of the project team.

might make more sense and save time if you provide the information through memos or e-mail. Then your people could read the information, think about it, and attend the meeting only to ask questions and/or discuss the information.

Do you want to motivate? It's true that the direct approach generally works best, rather than trying to motivate through representatives. But if your purpose for meeting is to motivate, keep it short. The best leaders can usually do the most good in the fewest words.

Do you want to make decisions? It depends on the method you choose whether it makes sense to have a lot of people. If you just want a vote, you can do so without a meeting. If you want a discussion, then maybe it's logical to invite everybody—for just the discussion and the vote.

Do you want to gather input and/or generate ideas? You may want all of your people there—or you may want to send



Voice Mail Replaces Meetings

When the cost of meetings wasn't paying off in results, Kris Kile, CEO of Total Restoration, Inc. in Amherst, NH, replaced them with broadcast voice mail followed up by memos.

"As we added people, our 30-minute sessions started costing us 10 hours of overtime per week," he explained in an interview. "Now I deliver short, focused pep talks by voicemails whenever necessary. I'll describe our current financial picture and remind people of our goals."

Source: "Making Meetings Work," Karen Carney, *Harvard Management Update*, October 1999.

out an e-mail to all and find out who's interested in providing input and/or coming up with ideas.

If you need any more reasons to keep your invitation list short, consider the political: it's easier to justify not inviting *a lot* of individuals than to justify not inviting *a few* individuals. If you invite only the people who are most important, who are essential, there will be enough people who are not invited that none of them should take it personally as a slight. But if you invite any people who are not essential, then you may feel pressure to invite everybody, for fear of offending somebody.

Prepare the People

After you've decided on the people to bring together for the meeting, you should talk with the "special cases"—people to whom you want to assign individual responsibilities and people from outside your unit.

Facilitator, Scribe, Timekeeper, and Note-Taker. Make sure that the people you've chosen to serve as facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, and note-taker understand the responsibilities of the assigned roles and are able to assume them. (We'll describe these roles and responsibilities in Chapter 3. Also, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, you may want to involve the facilitator in planning the meeting.)

You may need to provide some guidelines and offer some suggestions, especially for the facilitator and the scribe, whose roles are demanding. You may want to discuss how to work together during the meeting and what to do if problems arise. You might also show the facilitator Chapter 7 of this book, since many of the problems that could arise during the meeting would be his or her responsibility to help the group resolve.

Go over the items on the agenda. Remind the role players that their responsibilities could inhibit their ability to contribute to discussions and other activities. If any of them want to participate extensively in the activities for a certain agenda item, suggest that they should find someone to take over their roles during those activities, so as to be free to participate fully in the topic. This is

especially true for the facilitator, less true for the other roles.

Informants. Make sure that people you've designated to provide information understand what you expect, why the other participants need the information, and how much time they have to provide it. Indicate whether you expect some basic background, a short report, or a full presentation. Emphasize that informants should resist the temptation to be comprehensive: more isn't necessarily better—it's hard to get a drink of water from a fire hose. Suggest that, if possible, they provide the information in writing in advance, so participants get all of the information accurately, have time to read it and think about it, and then can use the meeting to ask questions and discuss the information.

If there are any agenda items for which participants will need information and you don't designate an informant or distribute information in advance, you should prepare a sheet of background information to share at the meeting.

Guests. Beforehand, talk with any guests invited to the meeting. Ask if they have any questions about what you expect to accomplish in the meeting and why you're inviting them. Fill them in on the group's history and meeting ground rules and norms.



No Dumping

How many meetings have you attended (or conducted) where time was spent presenting information that could have been delivered more efficiently and more effectively in writing? You know the scenario: one person reads the information and the others listen and maybe take notes. Unless they have photographic memories or they've been trained in stenography, they're likely to miss important points or make mistakes in their notes. If there's a discussion, they must rely on their memories and/or their notes. And even if they manage to take in and/or take down all of the information accurately, they may not be able to think about it quickly enough to ask questions or discuss it more than superficially. How *effective* is that? How *efficient* is that?

Two Different Worlds

In one small publishing company, there were surprising differences among the thirty or so employees, depending on their work activities and their managers. The marketers tended to approach their meetings with anxiety and conduct them in an orderly manner. Each felt under pressure to explain on the spot variances from their predictions and they tended otherwise to contribute only when they felt confident. In contrast, the editors tended to run their meetings a little more freely, interrupting each other, in the same spirit as they edited each other's writing. Two units, separated by less than 20 feet, yet two different worlds in terms of meeting culture and behavior.



What's the People Price?

Before finalizing your “guest list” for a meeting, do a quick calculation: add up the hourly cost (compensation and benefits) of all of the people on your list and multiply the total by the estimated duration in hours.

You can also consider the potential value of that time, the cost of lost opportunities. Every dollar spent on employee time should be returning at least a dollar of value—or you've got more problems than this book can cover.

It's not all about the cost of meetings, of course, since many of the benefits of meetings cannot be reduced to dollars and cents. However, when you know the approximate cost of bringing people together for a meeting, then you appreciate all the more the value of effective and efficient meetings.

When and Where Should You Meet?

Time and place are two issues you need to consider when planning your meeting.

When Should You Meet?

The first part of this question is often not really an issue. Depending on the schedules of the people you're inviting to the meeting, you may have few or no options. You schedule the meeting for a date and a time when all of the people will be free

to attend. If that's impossible, you check time with the people who are essential to your meeting and find a date and a time that fits their schedules.

If possible, consider the rhythms of your employees and your workplace. Starting fresh may be smart, but it's not so smart to expect your employees to be ready to meet and to participate actively as soon as they arrive at work on Monday morning. It's also generally unwise to schedule meetings immediately after lunch, when the gathering may seem more like a slumber party.

Some managers prefer to schedule meetings to end at lunch time or at the end of the day, counting on thoughts of eating or going home to motivate participants to keep on track and on time. However, if the activities are such that they let their minds wander, this timing strategy works against you.

You might also consider the circadian rhythms of your employees. You don't have to go scientific over those patterns of physiological and behavioral activity that occur on a 24-hour cycle, more or less. But you probably are aware that some of your people work better in the early morning, some a few hours later, some in the mid-afternoon, and so forth. You've probably noticed your own rhythms: you may handle routine tasks best as soon as you arrive at work, you may be more creative after a few hours, and then you may feel most like making phone calls in the early afternoon.

Arredondo notes (in *Communicating Effectively*, p. 150):

Typically, we have two "peak" periods when our physical energy and mental alertness are highest. For people who work days, those times are about 9:30-11:30 in the morning and about 3:00-5:00 in the afternoon. Most people experience a "slump" between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m.

If you can't schedule your meetings at a time when all or most of the participants are likely to be at their creative and productive best, maybe you can at least avoid some bad circadian confluence.

Make sure that the room for your meeting is available at the time when you want to schedule the meeting. If you have a choice of locations, you may first want to consider the possibilities outlined in the following section.

Where Should You Meet?

To be realistic, you may not have much choice here. But to the extent that you can choose, here are some quick suggestions.

First, you want a room that will accommodate comfortably the number of people invited. It should also allow space for a facilitator to move around easily and a scribe with a flip chart or whatever type of display you'll be using.

Second, you want a room that allows for the proper atmosphere for your meeting. Seating can make a big difference in the mood and the results.

To promote interaction, the best arrangement is a circle, a square, or a U shape. These configurations give all participants the same status and encourage all to contribute equally.

A rectangular table tends to focus attention toward one end or the other. If you use this configuration, put the scribe at one end (at the front or wherever there's more room). Depending on the circumstances, it may be better for the facilitator to move around the room—to help animate the participants and spare them the neck aches often caused by this seating arrangement—or to sit still—so as not to distract participants from focusing on each other and what the scribe is recording.

(If you're interested in other possibilities, read "10 Layouts for Setting Up a Meeting Room" in *101 Ways to Make Meetings Active* by Mel Silberman, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 1999.)

Third, make sure that the room has at least adequate lighting, that any windows have blinds or curtains to reduce sunlight and other distractions, that the temperature can be maintained at a comfortable level, and that the room is properly ventilated. It should also have any equipment or other facilities that you need (for slides, video, audio, computers. etc.).



**Smart
Managing**

We're All Only Human

The best meetings may depend, to some extent, on the comfort of the chairs. You might not be able to choose the chairs, but if you can't you should at least keep them in mind when you're thinking about the length of your meetings.

As a fellow manager once pointed out, "You're calling on their brains, but they don't leave their butts behind." To get the most out of the former, you've got to keep the latter comfortable. Be alert for squirming; if it becomes frequent and/or sustained, it's probably time to let the brains go for the sake of the butts.

Finalize and Distribute the Agenda

Now that you've planned and sequenced the items to cover, decided on the people to invite and assigned the meeting responsibilities, set the time, and chosen the room (and reserved it, if necessary), it's time to finalize your agenda. What should it contain?

If the meeting is complex or long, if you expect strong disagreements, and/or if the group has a history of serious problems with meetings, the agenda should contain the following information:

Date and time

Place

Purpose

Start time

Items

For each item:

Purpose

Goals—outcomes

Methods (activities)

For each activity:

Person responsible

Time allotted

Start time, duration, stop time

Summary: start time, duration, stop time

Evaluation: start time, duration, stop time

Stop time

List of participants (indicating who's serving as facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, and note-taker and identifying any guests)

For most meetings, this level of detail is unnecessary. A simple list of items may provide enough structure.

What format should you use for your agenda? Figure 2-3 (next page) shows an example of an agenda format.

The format of your agenda doesn't matter much, as long as

- It states the outcome(s) desired
- It is well organized and structured
- The items are outlined concisely, in plain language
- The components of each item are outlined
- The person responsible for providing information or leadership is indicated
- The start and stop times and durations are displayed prominently

You might want to specify the methods to be used. This is particularly important, as we've explained, for making decisions. For discussing options and assigning tasks, you could indicate the methods or leave them to the facilitator and/or the group to choose. As for providing information, it's up to the people designated as informants to choose their methods according to the needs of the participants and the time allotted.

There are no rules for putting an agenda into words—just “serving suggestions.” Exercise your best judgment. You know what you want to accomplish. You know the people to whom you'll be distributing the agenda. You'll want the participants to know what you expect to happen at the meeting so they can best prepare to contribute. You'll want other people who might be reading the agenda to know what you're doing—and how you're managing the people and the time so well. The best way for you, in your particular situation, to prepare a particular agenda is not to be found in any book.

Marketing Department Meeting Agenda	
Date:	September 4, 2002
Start Time:	10:00 a.m.
Stop Time:	11:04 a.m.
Purpose:	Decide on how to use Web to market products; decide on how to market Wonder Widget
Desired Outcome:	Strategy for using Web to market products; determine approach for marketing Wonder Widget
10:00–10:02: (2 minutes) Review agenda and any changes	
10:02–10:21 (19 minutes)	
10:02–10:08:	Information of Web market (Jerry, attached report)
10:08–10:17:	Discussion of options (facilitator)
10:17–10:19:	Decision (vote) (facilitator)
10:19–10:21:	Assignment of tasks (facilitator)
10:21–10:50 (29 minutes)	
10:21–10:28:	Outline of three options for marketing Wonder Widget (Alyce, information provided in advance)
10:28–10:48:	Decision (consensus) (facilitator)
10:48–10:50:	Assignment of tasks (facilitator)
10:50–10:56: (6 minutes) Summation of main points, decisions, and assignments (facilitator)	
10:56–11:04: (8 minutes) Evaluation (facilitator)	
11:04 End	
Participants:	Anna (facilitator), Same (scribe), Brigitte (timekeeper), Tasha (note-taker), Marisol, Rupert, Martha, Anthony Taylor (Sales Department), Marge Hopkins (R&D)

Figure 2-3. Form for meeting agenda

Get the Agenda Out and About

Get the agenda out to the participants at least 24 hours in advance. Attach any materials for the participants to read or review to prepare for the meeting. Check with any participants responsible for providing information; they may have materials to include. All participants should know what to expect and have time to prepare appropriately for it. A meeting should never be a surprise party.

You might also attach any key questions that will help participants focus their thinking and prepare them for thoughtful and committed interaction.

And then stick to the agenda. That should be obvious—but some managers either shift focus or forget what they intended to do. Tim Paeltz, in his notes for *Circular Management—or How to*

Run an Organization and Not Go Anywhere, describes what *not* to do:

Tell your committee that you will have a meeting in three months to discuss either subject A or subject B. Never state definitely which subject will be discussed. When the meeting starts, announce that you are there to discuss subject C and then ask who is ready to discuss subject C. When no one is ready, state that they had three months to prepare. *You* are ready. Why aren't *they*?

How you distribute the agenda will depend on the culture of your workplace, the participants selected, and the work schedules and habits of the participants. If memos and notices are usually printed and placed in mailboxes, that's probably the best way to go. If memos and notices are generally distributed by e-mail, that's how you should distribute the agenda. It's even better if you use both paper and electrons. Be sure to choose methods appropriate for all of the people you're inviting.

A smart manager allows for individual differences and special situations. If, for example, you know that any of the participants tend to be slow on checking their mailboxes or their e-mail, it's wise to phone those people or even talk to them in



Think "Project Plan"

Think of your agenda as a work plan for a project.

Before you distribute it, review it and ask yourself, "Is this something that I'd submit to my boss?"

Remember that paperwork tends to live a long life. As Horace observed of his writing two millennia ago: "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze." Your agenda may not be a work of art, but it should definitely be something that shows your management skills.

person, just to make sure they know about the agenda. Sure, that takes a little extra effort—but it's easier than running a meeting with participants who haven't reviewed the agenda in advance and are not prepared.

It may happen that someone tells you that he or she has nothing to contribute to the meeting or to gain from attending it. If so, take a moment to explain why you're inviting him or her. If you can't, then maybe that person is right and should not be attending.

One final thought about getting the word out about the meeting: it may take more than a sheet of paper. Sure, you're working with adults who can read and can schedule their lives, but they're also busy and not all are as well organized as you. The bottom line is that you're planning the meeting to achieve certain objectives and you're relying on all the people you've invited to contribute toward those outcomes, so you've got good reason to do whatever it takes to make sure they're all there and ready. And with e-mail, voice mail, and cell phones, it's easier than ever to reach out and remind.

Prepare Materials

First, make a list of all of the materials and equipment you'll need. This serves three purposes:

- As you prepare, you'll think more carefully about what you'll need.
- As you're leaving for the meeting, you'll have an easy way to verify that you're bringing all the things that you'll need.
- As you arrive in the room, you'll be able to quickly check the facilities.

Make sure that you have any media you want to use—slides, video, audio, and so on. If you need equipment, check that it will be available for the meeting. How many flipcharts or whiteboards will you need? Your list should include markers (for flipchart or

whiteboard) and masking tape to post sheets of flipchart paper on the walls. You might also add to the list a flipchart pad—particularly if discussions tend to keep the scribe busy.

If you prepare informational materials for participants, distribute them in advance, if possible. If you distribute them during the meeting, take the time to review them, explaining and answering any questions. Never hit and run—handing out materials and hoping that participants will read them. Some will dutifully put them away—and most likely forget about them—and others will skim them while you continue—which virtually guarantees that they'll fully understand neither the materials nor whatever the group is doing.

Finally, it may be worth the effort to put the agenda on a flipchart or a transparency, to display during the meeting. The participants will all have copies, of course—if they remember to bring them. (Bring extra copies, just in case.) But with the agenda on display it's easier for the facilitator to keep the meeting on track if he or she can simply gesture toward the agenda item if participants begin to stray from the topic.

The idea is simple—but the effects can be profound. You can print a few questions on a sheet of flipchart paper or have something prepared by a graphic designer. However you put the writing on the wall, it will remind any people who gather in the room that meetings are serious work.

Lend a Helping Hand

Make life easier for the note-taker. Sure, you can't physically lend a hand to help him or her keep track of the meeting. However, you can provide assistance by investing a few moments in advance.

It's easy with word processing programs to customize the agenda for the note-taker, by inserting a page break after each agenda item, to allow a blank page sufficient to take notes of main points, decisions, and actions on that item.

If he or she will be taking notes on a computer, give him or her the file to serve as a template for taking notes.





Read the Writing on the Wall

Intel Corporation has been cited as an organization that takes meetings very seriously. On the walls of conference rooms in Intel factories and offices is a poster that lists a few simple questions for the people who meet there:

- Do you know the purpose of this meeting?
- Do you have an agenda?
- Do you know your role?
- Do you follow the rules for good meetings?

Source: "The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings," Eric Matson, *Fast Company*, April 1996.

Just in Case

In planning the agenda and in preparing materials, your focus is on success. This is preparation to bring about a best-case scenario. However, you should also prepare to deal with a worst-case scenario—or at least problems that are likely to arise. Chapter 7 is devoted to problems, but here are a few that you can usually prevent with a little preparation. So, take a little time to plan and prepare for problems.

Absences. It happens, at least occasionally, that a person designated to be responsible for some aspect of a meeting is unable to make it. You can prepare for this possibility by asking participants assigned to be informants to provide you with a copy in advance of any information.

Personality Conflicts. Problems can arise out of personal conflicts, and such conflicts are only too natural. However, you can reduce the possibility of clashes by talking with potentially contentious individuals prior to the meeting about any concerns. Encourage them to express their perspectives without getting into personal attacks.

Materials and Machines. Arrange your materials so you can quickly find whatever you'll need as you need it. Verify that you've got everything. (This is where a checklist is very valuable.) Practice using any special equipment, such as VCRs,

overhead projectors, and so forth.

You can also delegate this responsibility to an administrative assistant, the facilitator, or participants to whom you've assigned special responsibilities. If someone will be using a piece of equipment to make a presentation, for example, he or she should be responsible for ensuring that the equipment is there and working properly and he or she should be familiar with using it.

This chapter has been long, because, as noted at the start, any meeting worth holding is worth planning, and good meetings start with good preparation. It may seem like a lot of work at first, but planning well becomes easier and more natural with time and experience.

Now, on to Chapter 3, where we discuss putting all of this planning into action!

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 2

- ☐ Any meeting worth holding is worth planning. Good meetings start in advance—with good preparation.
- ☐ Before you begin planning a meeting, ask yourself, “Is a meeting the best way to achieve what I want to achieve?”
- ☐ To develop an agenda, you need to answer the following questions:
 - What do you want to do?
 - What outcome(s) do you want?
 - What's the best way to achieve the desired outcome(s)?
 - How much time is required?
 - How should the pieces of the meeting be sequenced most effectively and efficiently?
 - Who is necessary? Why?
- ☐ After you've planned to make your meeting a success, plan for potential problems. Aim at bringing about a best-case scenario, but be ready to deal with any worst-case scenario.



Starting the Meeting

Arrive in the room at least 5 minutes early, 10 if you have materials and equipment to set up, and even a little earlier if you're unfamiliar with the room. You may want to post the agenda—on a flipchart, a transparency, or however appropriate. (It's best if you've prepared in advance some way to display it.) At the very least, put up the goal of the meeting in a prominent place, so it stays foremost in everyone's mind.

If you're not busy setting up materials and equipment, greet the participants as they arrive. This is a sort of natural warm-up, promoting a feeling of community and shared enthusiasm and energy.

3, 2, 1 ... Start!

Start the meeting at the scheduled time. To delay, except under extraordinary circumstances, shows disrespect for those who are there on time and encourages participants to arrive late. Show that you expect all participants to arrive by the scheduled time by starting as planned.

Any missing participants may arrive by the end of the warm-up. In that case, no problem.

If not, then, as the facilitator reviews the agenda, he or she can rearrange the items to work around the absence, if possible. For example, if the missing person was to give a presentation to start the meeting, the meeting can start with another agenda item. (However, if the entire meeting depends on that presentation, you may be forced to wait.)

How long should the group wait for someone essential to the meeting? That depends on the other participants, the ground rules, and the missing person. If the “someone essential” is the CEO of your organization, it’s probably wise to wait a little longer than ordinary. If you must call off the meeting, apologize for the inconvenience and thank the participants for understanding the situation.

What if you’re running late and can’t make the meeting on time?

The facilitator should start the meeting, because, with the agenda and participants who are prepared for the meeting, the group can get started without you. And that’s good.

As a manager the important thing is not what happens when you are there, but what happens when you are not there.

—Kenneth Blanchard, business author

Warm up the Team

As Michael Begeman, manager of the 3M Meeting Network, points out in “You Have to Start Meeting Like This!” (*Fast Company*, April 1999):

There is a legitimate social component to meetings. Sure, we’d all rather be efficient than sloppy in our work. Sure, we’d all rather spend our time on “real work” than on “idle chitchat.” But you should never overlook the social side of work rituals—even in meetings that are “all business.”

The usual way to meet the social needs of the participants and transition into the meeting is through *warm-ups*. A warm-up is a quick, round-the-group sharing of ideas, issues, information, or concerns at the beginning of the meeting. A warm-up has several important purposes:

- To break the ice among people who do not know each other.
- To involve all participants from the start of the meeting.
- To generate a team feeling.
- To allow participants to share their concerns, needs, and hopes.
- To focus participants on the meeting purpose and agenda.



Warm-up A quick, round-the-group sharing of ideas, issues, information, or concerns at the beginning of the meeting.

A simple warm-up consists of giving the participants a sentence starter to finish, such as:

- “Issues and concerns I’m checking at the door are....”
- “What I’ve been doing prior to this meeting is....”
- “My hopes for this meeting are....”
- “My concerns for this meeting are....”

If any of the participants don’t know each other, you might start the warm-up by asking each participant to provide some information about himself or herself, such as the following:

- Name
- Unit
- Job
- Length of time with the unit and/or the organization
- Reason for attending the meeting
- What he or she can contribute to the group

When there are only a few strangers to the group, you might feel tempted to have only those newcomers introduce themselves. That would be a mistake, because it ignores the needs of the new people to also learn something about other participants.

It also creates a gap between “the group” and “the others.” Participants in a meeting should feel like peers—a feeling that should start with introductions.

Begeman explains:

In many of the meetings that I run ... I schedule 5 or 10 minutes of open time, just to encourage people to relate to one another. If you plan for such time, if you put it on your agenda, then you won't feel as if you're not doing what you ought to be doing....

For some meetings, I book a certain amount of time at the beginning to ask, “Is there anything that people need to say in order to be ‘present’ at this meeting?” ... Just because people walk into a conference room doesn't mean that their mind is on your meeting. If you let people express their frustrations before you get down to business, you allow them to clear their mind and to focus on your meeting.

Set the Tone

Another benefit of a warm-up is that it sets the tone for the meeting. It should be collegial—and the language should be informal. This allows participants to understand each other and to participate more naturally. The language of meetings should be the language that the participants use in their normal work-place interactions.

The success of a meeting depends on participation from every person attending. Meetings are work. You've selected the employees and others who are essential to that work. Now you need to develop the sense of community that will inspire every member of the group to share in the responsibility for making the meeting a success by contributing and collaborating.

Establish the Ground Rules

If the participants have worked together in meetings, the group should already have established ground rules. You may want to



All Work and No Play

Michael Begeman reminds us:

"There is much more to people ... than what's above the neck. We are not just intellects that come together to interact with other intellects. The more you involve the whole person in your meetings, the more people will learn, and the more of that learning they will retain. If you want people to work together effectively, let them play together."

Begeman advises having "kinetic stuff" in meeting rooms—squeeze balls, Slinkies, and other toys. He believes that toys help relieve stress and enhance creativity. "I've found that when people have something to play with, when they can get more of their body involved in what they're doing, they become more creative." ("You Have to Start Meeting Like This!" *Fast Company*, April 1999)

review them briefly before getting to the agenda. Get some agreement—verbal or nonverbal—from everyone. It would be good to ask if anyone wants to propose any changes or additions. The ground rules should not be carved in stone: all participants should always feel like the ground rules belong to them and that they can modify them based on their experiences together.

If you haven't established ground rules, then the next logical step would be to do so.

Ground rules are agreements about behaviors: they should promote respect, collaboration, and efficiency without hindering spontaneity and creativity. Most people come to a meeting with some expectations about how participants should act. Establishing a code of conduct is simply about expressing those expectations and reaching agreement on how to regulate behavior to meet them.

So, it's important to set ground rules—and then just as important to make sure that they work.

Developing Ground Rules

As important as the rules themselves is the way in which the rules are developed. Sure, you could just post a list of rules that you personally consider essential to running meetings effectively and efficiently. Then you could just enforce them as you enforce your organization's policies.

But it's better if the participants develop the ground rules themselves, because the rules will be specific to their group, because they'll feel a sense of ownership, and because they'll be more likely to follow the ground rules if they all agree on them.

The facilitator can start the discussion by just asking a question such as "What guidelines should we adopt so that our meetings make the most of what all of us have to offer?" or "What are some principles that we should all keep in mind during our meetings?"

The discussion that generates the meeting rules also serves another important purpose: it reveals values and emotions that can divide the participants or unite them. The way in which participants develop their ground rules shows a lot about how they'll work together.

If participants have trouble starting this discussion, the facilitator can suggest one or two topics for them to consider. He or she might also want to suggest more topics as the discussion wanes.

Once participants start making and discussing suggestions for rules, the facilitator should help them word their proposals and guide them through the decision process. The scribe records the ground rules on a flipchart or whiteboard.

After the meeting, the scribe transfers the ground rules to regular sheets of paper and/or another convenient medium. Then, you can bring the rules to every meeting, to review them for the group and/or display them during the meeting.

Groups typically adopt or at least consider *ground rules* covering the following issues:

- Attendance
- Promptness: procedure for dealing with latecomers—bring them up to speed? sanction?
- Participation
- Meeting role assignments
- Interruptions: pagers and cell phones?
- Respect
- Discussion process

**100 Miles Away**

To reduce interruptions, you might adopt the “100-mile rule”: no participant should be called from the meeting unless the reason is so important and urgent that the person would be contacted even if the meeting were being held 100 miles from the workplace. This rule would be communicated to secretaries, assistants, and anyone else who might be handling the phones or welcoming visitors. (*The Team Handbook*, p. 4-2)

- Confidentiality: how is it determined what discussions are confidential? What information or comments are not to leave the room?
- Assignments
- Method for evaluating meetings
- Chronic violations of rules

Sometimes groups decide on a penalty for breaking ground rules. For example, the group might decide that any participant who causes an unnecessary interruption must buy coffee, tea, and soft drinks for all of the others during the next break or for the next meeting. Or the group might decide that participants who arrive late are responsible for providing refreshments for the next meeting.

To the extent possible, the group members should be responsible for enforcing their ground rules. The facilitator should be sensitive and as ready to help them with this process as with any other. If somebody breaks a rule and it seems like a serious matter, the facilitator may scan the faces of the other members for any negative reactions and, with a facial expression or gesture, encourage them to react, just as he or she might encourage reactions to a contribution. At times, it may be necessary for him or her to intervene, if a violation of a rule seems serious and the other members of the group aren't reacting to it. And sometimes members of the group may just let violations pass, if they're not serious, but mention them when they evaluate the meeting.

Finally, the simpler the rules, the easier they are to remem-



Dialogue vs. Debate

Some difficulties cannot easily be avoided through rules. Discussions often cause discords that no amount of rules could prevent. (Consider the discussions in the U.S. Congress, for example!)

It might help prevent problems if you make sure that participants understand the differences between *dialogue* and *debate*:

- In a *debate*, people are driven by their individual interests to advocate for their opinions and positions and to win over other opinions and positions.
- In a *dialogue*, people express their opinions and differences in an effort to arrive at what's better for the group, in a spirit of mutual understanding, a quest for commonalities, and a sense of community.

ber and follow—and for you to review at the start of meetings, as necessary. Also, a group that gets bogged down in legalistic wrangling over rules is setting a dangerous pattern for discussing other matters. In addition, the more involved the discussion becomes, the easier for participants to obsess over rules and neglect the principles behind them—such as respect, collaboration, and efficiency.

The group is responsible for developing and adopting ground rules. In this process, as in all others during a meeting, the members of the group are all equals. The facilitator and the scribe are serving, not governing; they should act as peers. You cannot use your rank as manager to influence anybody; you should act as a peer. Just trust that the participants will decide to modify the rules as they gain a little experience applying them. The ground rules are for the benefit of the group and the members are more likely to adhere to rules that they have generated.

Working with the Rules

Review the rules at the beginning of meetings, at least until it no longer seems necessary. It may be enough to display the rules at every meeting, so everyone can see them. It should be sufficient to post only the essentials, not the details. The essence of most

rules can be summed up in just a few words. (If not, then that may indicate that the rule is too complicated.)

Displaying the rules will serve as a reminder. However, if participants start bending or breaking a rule, it's easy for others to call out the rule as a warning. It's generally most effective if participants correct each other, as peers. Just as they took responsibility for developing the rules to guide their community, they should take responsibility for helping each other abide by them.

What if reminders and peer correction aren't effective? Then, it's time to discuss why people are not following the rules.

It may be wise to spend some time occasionally discussing how well the ground rules are working for the group. Are any changes needed? How can the group adapt to issues that arise? You don't want to play the role of police officer, enforcing rules. You want the members of the group to monitor themselves and decide what to do if any ground rules are broken repeatedly.

Assign Roles

"Recognize the principles of shared responsibility," says Eli Mina, author of *The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings* ("Help Make Meetings Productive," by Michele Marrinan, Monster.com). "We need to establish a different kind of culture where it's up to every person at the meeting to pull his or her weight to make it work."

One way to develop the sense of community that will inspire every group member to share in the responsibility for the meeting is through the warm-up. Another great way is to rotate roles for each meeting, so all members of the group share the task of running the meeting and develop their leadership, initiative, collaborative skills, and efficiency. That approach to running meetings may also make life easier for you—but don't count on it, at least not yet.

It's usually most practical to assign four roles, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 2:

- Facilitator

- Scribe
- Timekeeper
- Note-taker

Rotate the roles among the participants as much as possible. It may be easier to ask for volunteers or to assign roles according to the abilities and personalities of the participants. However, you shouldn't assign roles only to the people who seem best qualified: if the spirit of collaboration is strong, every member of the group should be allowed a chance at each role.

Also, it's wiser in the long run to rotate roles, for at least four reasons:

- Rotation provides practical training for each participant in all roles.
- Rotation allows every participant an opportunity to be "just a participant" with no particular responsibilities to restrict his or her freedom to contribute.
- Rotation obviates the possibility that any participants will envy or resent any others for exercising special authority.

Rotation also encourages every participant to be responsible for a successful meeting; people are naturally more likely to behave appropriately when they know that each of them will have a turn at facilitating—and hoping that everybody behaves.

Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is to make the group's work easier. His or her key responsibilities are as follows:

- Coordinate with the scribe, the timekeeper, and the note-taker.
- Maintain an appropriate pace.

Change Partners

Rotate roles to allow each participant an opportunity to handle all delegated meeting responsibilities, if possible. You should at least avoid assigning the same roles to the same people, even if they volunteer for those roles. Rotation ensures each participant a chance to develop skills—and you won't be accused of dumping tougher roles on some employees or playing favorites.



- Cover each of the agenda items, one at a time, in order:
 - Introduce each agenda item.
 - Conduct the discussion of the item.
 - Keep discussions focused on the agenda item.
 - Check for full understanding of any decisions on that item.
 - Close the discussion of the item.
- Encourage full participation by all members.
- Help the participants evaluate the meeting.
- Close the meeting.



Facilitator A person whose meeting role is to make the group's work easier by leading the group through the agenda, systematically and at an appropriate pace, and encouraging full participation by all members.

This role is generally considered to be the most difficult. It requires leadership, quick understanding, tact, sensitivity, good communication skills, and a grasp of psychology. The facilitator needs to be able

to anticipate problems and opportunities—and then avoid the problems and take advantage of the opportunities.

Here are some general guidelines for facilitators.

When a participant makes a contribution, the facilitator should:

- Acknowledge it, at least with a nod.
- Check to ensure understanding, if necessary. (“OK, so are you saying that...?”)



Smart Managing

Two Heads May Be Better Than One

Some managers might not feel comfortable turning over the meeting to the facilitator. After all, it's a big responsibility that requires skills and sensitivity that not everybody possesses. If you feel that the person you designated to facilitate may not be completely ready and able to handle the role, you may want to work out some way to share the responsibilities. The next time around, both of you may be confident that he or she can go it alone.

- Paraphrase, summarize concisely, if necessary. (“So, what you’re saying is that....”)
- React positively. (“Good point!” or “That’s an important consideration” or “Interesting perspective.”)
- Find the best. (“What I find most interesting in your comment is...” or “Your suggestion brings up a perspective that we haven’t considered.”)
- Question, even challenge. (“Your idea makes sense in a way, but how does it play out with...?” or “We could try the approach you’re suggesting, but are there ways to reduce resistance?”)
- Show connections. (“That point ties in with what X mentioned earlier, adding the perspective of...)
- Help others develop it. (“That’s a good point. Now, what would be related issues?” or “That takes us into new territory. What other aspects should we consider along those lines?”)
- Watch for visual clues, such as body language and facial expressions that say, “I’ve got something to say” or “I like that idea” or “I’m concerned about something” or “I’m bored.”
- Remain neutral—or at least objective—and open, however he or she feels personally, and not allow his or her ideas or opinions to inhibit participation.

To bring closure to a discussion, the facilitator should summarize the main points and consolidate related points: “It would seem, then, that we’ve got four ways that we could go on this issue” and “Several comments show an interest in pursuing this line of investigation.”

The facilitator should get all of the participants involved. Here are some situations and ways that the facilitator might deal with them:

- If some participants are quiet, he or she can call on them individually: “Jill, you have some experience in this area. Can you help us out?” or “Tom, you know something

about this issue. Would you like to share your insights with us?" He or she can also move around the group for ideas, letting the natural circle invite quiet members to participate.

- If any participants are critical negatively (as opposed to constructively), he or she can try to help them be constructive, by asking questions such as "So, how would we be able to improve that situation?" or "Since we're aware of the problems, could you suggest any solutions?"
- If any comments seem harsh, he or she should try rewording in ways that present the key points without inflammatory language.
- If any comments become personal, he or she should intervene: "Could we get back to the agenda item, please?" or "Could we please focus on the issue that we're considering?"

When a discussion is going well, with contributions coming from around the group, the facilitator must make sure that the scribe and the note-taker are keeping up. If not, then he or she should slow the pace a little and/or help by repeating or summarizing contributions for the two writers.

If a discussion isn't going well, even when the facilitator is



Six Killers

The facilitator should be alert to the six "meeting killers" identified by Gregory M. Bounds and John A. Woods in *Supervision* (Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing, 1998, pp. 89-90):

1. Hogging: too much talking by one person.
2. Bogging: staying on one subject for too long.
3. Fogging: avoiding a topic or being vague or defensive.
4. Frogging: jumping from topic to topic without any closure.
5. Flogging: attacking a person rather than dealing with the person's contribution.
6. Clogging: slowing down the group by failing to accomplish action items.

asking probing and challenging questions, calling on individuals, and offering suggestions, he or she might decide to change the dynamics by dividing the group into twos or threes (dyads or triads, if you prefer fancy terms). He or she should challenge the clusters with one or two questions to consider, allow them a few minutes to discuss the questions, and then bring them together to present the results of their discussions. (If the layout of the room doesn't allow any spatial separation of participants into twos and threes, the facilitator can form pairs—participants seated side by side or across the table—or quartets—both side by side and across the table.)

Scribe

The scribe posts key ideas, points, and comments during discussions on a flipchart, a whiteboard, or other means of display, so that all participants can refer to them. He or she is responsible for displaying a “living record” of the progress of the group. His or her key responsibilities are as follows:

Scribe A person whose meeting role is to post key ideas, points, and comments during discussions so that all participants can refer to them. He or she is responsible for displaying a “living record” of the progress of the group.



- Write large and legibly enough so that all can read the notes.
- Check to make sure all ideas, points, and comments are recorded accurately.
- Get input on wording from other participants.
- Summarize all decisions in full sentences.

Keeping a “living record” on display is important because:

- It provides a physical means of keeping the focus on the topic being discussed, which helps prevent tangents.
- It assures participants that their contributions have been recorded, which encourages participation.
- It shows which ideas, points, and comments have been

contributed, which reduces or eliminates repetition.

- It relieves the participants of the burden of taking notes, which allows them to follow the discussion better and contribute more easily.
- It provides a “group memory” so participants can return more easily to a point made earlier, which reduces the urge to jump in immediately, even interrupt, to comment on a point before it's forgotten and left behind.
- It helps keep participants aware of the progress the group is making, which builds morale.



Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

What's most important for a scribe is to capture all the contributions and record them accurately and legibly. This means that he or she shouldn't worry about spelling or always using the exact wording (summarize, if possible) or writing in full sentences or even using full words (abbreviate whenever possible).

The roles of the facilitator and the scribe usually require quick comprehension and an ability to follow the pieces of a linear puzzle. For best results, the facilitator and the scribe should work together closely. The facilitator should check to make sure that the scribe is recording the contribu-

tions accurately. The scribe should ask for clarification of any ideas, points, or comments that seem unclear, which helps the facilitator guide the discussion.

Timekeeper

The timekeeper helps the group keep on track with the timing of the agenda during the meeting. His or her key responsibilities are as follows:

- Keep track of time during the meeting.
- Warn the group when the time allocated for an agenda item is almost up, by announcing the time remaining. At that point the facilitator can ask the group to decide whether to close the discussion or to continue it and

change other items on the agenda.

- Signal when the time allocated for an agenda item is up.

Timekeeper A person whose meeting role is to help the group keep on track with the timing of the agenda.



The purpose of having a timekeeper is not to police time limits rigidly but rather to help the group keep to the timing of the agenda and use its meeting time most efficiently. It's possible to run meetings without this role: the facilitator can keep track of the time or you can do so and use gestures to signal the facilitator.

Also, since very few meetings run exactly by the clock, the timekeeper needs to adjust the stop and start times if the group falls behind or goes ahead of the schedule.

Give the Facilitator a Hand

Lani Arredondo suggests that the timekeeper use simple hand signals (*Communicating Effectively*, pp. 152-153): 10 fingers up to show 10 minutes remaining, five fingers for five minutes, and the sports time-out signal when time is up. The timekeeper could also use the show business "slash throat" signal to suggest that the facilitator cut off the activity.



Note-Taker

The note-taker captures and records the basics of the meeting for a permanent record. His or her key responsibilities are as follows:

- Keep the minutes of the meeting using the established format.
- Check with the group for accuracy whenever necessary.
- Finalize the minutes.
- Ensure that copies of the minutes are distributed.

What should the note-taker record? It's usually

Note-taker A person whose meeting role is to capture and record the basics of the meeting for a permanent record.



enough just to document the essentials, not to provide the equivalent of a court stenographer's transcript of every word said by anybody. The note-taker should focus on the following four types of information:

- Decisions
- Action items: things that people will do
- Open issues: things to be considered later
- Key discussion points

The note-taker must be accurate, objective, and able to write concisely and in a "reader-friendly" style. He or she is likely to rely on the running record kept by the scribe, but document only the main points. Also, the facilitator may indicate to the note-taker to record a certain idea, point, or comment. It could be suggested that any participant who wishes to make an idea, point, or comment part of the permanent record signal that request to the note-taker.

It usually takes very little time and effort for the note-taker to finalize the minutes after the meeting. (This is particularly true if you provide a laptop computer to whomever you designate for the role.) It's essentially just a matter of transferring to a computer anything written by hand. Then, the agenda can be attached or you can e-mail the note-taker your computer file, which he or she can then insert into the record. If any participants have presented reports, they can e-mail the note-taker files of their reports. Then the note-taker has only to transfer any other information to the computer and print copies. You should keep a copy of the minutes for all meetings in a notebook, for easy reference. You should also get the computer files and archive them, for easier searching and retrieval as necessary (and any later corrections).

Is it necessary to have a formal process for approving the minutes? No, not usually. However, the participants may decide at some point to adopt a rule calling for some approval process. Generally it should be enough to encourage participants to review the distributed copy of the minutes of a meeting and

then bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the manager before the next meeting or raise them with the group at the beginning of the next meeting.

As noted above, the note-taker should keep the minutes of the meeting using the established format. This means you should specify the format as soon as possible, so that your meetings will be documented with consistency.

Your organization may have a set format for keeping minutes. On the other hand, you may be free to develop a format, on your own, or with your group. A good format allows anybody to know at a glance what's most important—what was covered in a meeting, what was decided, what actions were planned, what's expected and by when, and who is responsible for those actions.

What should the minutes include?

1. Date, time, and location of the meeting
2. List of participants
3. List of people invited but absent
4. Participants assigned as facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, and note-taker
5. Agenda
6. Main discussion points and outcomes (decisions and action items) for each agenda item, with the names of the participants responsible for the action items and the dates and times for completion
7. Items for consideration at later meetings
8. Meeting evaluation
9. Reports (attached)

To Intervene or Not to Intervene?

You entrust participants with important responsibilities and you should rotate the roles to allow every participant the opportunity to play all of the roles. It's almost inevitable, then, that a role player might not perform up to your expectations—or, perhaps more important, the expectations of the group. So, what do you do?

In general, try to refrain from getting involved. Mistakes are part of the learning process with any responsibility. Against short-term effects, such as confusion and embarrassment and time wasted, weigh the long-term effects of offending the role player, undermining the responsibility of the role, and causing other employees to wonder if you'll intervene when they're playing the role.

You are most likely to be tempted to intervene with the facilitator, because of the importance of the role and the skills it requires. Here are some questions to consider in deciding whether or not to intervene with the facilitator:

- Does the facilitator need help? Is the facilitator asking for help?
- Is the facilitator saying or doing something that you should question or challenge?
- Can you resolve the problem by nodding or shaking your head?
- Is the group planning something that's illegal, unethical, or a violation of policy?
- Do you have any knowledge or experience that is essential in this situation?
- Do you have information that would be beneficial in this situation?

What happens next? It's all outlined in Chapter 4, where your agenda and the facilitator guide the participants through the meeting and into planning for action.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 3

- ☐ The group needs ground rules, a code of conduct that promotes respect, collaboration, and efficiency without hindering spontaneity and creativity.
- ☐ It's essential for participants to share responsibility for running their meetings. They can do this by adopting roles:
 - Facilitator, to lead the group through the agenda system-

atically at an appropriate pace and encourage full participation by all members.

- Scribe, to post key ideas, points, and comments during discussions, as a display of the progress of the group.
- Timekeeper, to help the group keep on track with the timing of the agenda.
- Note-taker, to capture and record the basics of the meeting for a permanent record.



Conducting the Meeting

The facilitator should first make sure that the scribe, the timekeeper, and the note-taker are ready.

He or she should then review the agenda, to make sure that all participants are on the same page—literally. (Sure, you’ve distributed the agenda early, to allow everyone to read it and prepare for each of the items. But you know that sometimes, even with the best of planning, realities get in the way.) The facilitator should take a minute or two to do the following:

- Explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Check to make sure the participants understand each of the agenda items and the purpose(s).
- Ask if there are any changes to suggest. If so, the group decides whether or not to revise the agenda. The facilitator can ask for a show of hands: “Those who want to make this change to the agenda, raise your hands. Those who prefer to schedule it for the next meeting, raise your hands.”

This is also the time for you to make any changes in your plans. But take note of the following recommendations:

- Make only necessary changes.
- Explain why you're making the changes.
- Thank any participants who prepared reports, presentations, or other things for any agenda item affected by your changes. If you're simply postponing an item, tell them so. If you're dropping any items, apologize for the inconvenience.
- Allow any participants to leave whose attendance is now unnecessary.

Follow the Agenda

Here's the starting point for any advice on making meetings more productive: stick to the agenda. You developed the agenda to serve as a map for the group. The facilitator should proceed through the agenda, item by item, unless he or she feels it would be better to modify the order, according to circumstances. (We'll discuss some of these circumstances a little later in this chapter.)

For each item, the facilitator follows the map. The details will vary according to the item, the objectives, and the group,

Ownership Starts with You

Why should the group review the agenda, since you distributed it in advance? It allows everyone to accept the agenda or to make suggestions for improving it.

That way, they own the meeting plan and are more committed to following it and participating more fully in the meeting. As Carolyn B. Thompson notes in *Interviewing Skills for Managers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, p. 14), "A meeting is just a gathering of bodies if there's no meeting of the minds."



It's Not Carved in Stone

"It's a bad plan that can't be changed." Publilius Syrus, an author and social commentator, uttered those words over 2000 years ago. They're still true—and good for you to keep in mind during a meeting.





Agenda: Handle with Care

Once you've communicated your agenda, it belongs to the group. If you expect people to take agendas and meetings seriously, you should set an example—unlike the manager described by Tim Paeltz in his notes for *Circular Management—or How to Run an Organization and Not Go Anywhere*:

The manager distributed an agenda—and then arrived at the meeting with a new agenda. Several of his employees had spent time and energy preparing reports for the meeting, reports that were not on the new agenda. Then, when the employees who no longer had any reason to attend the meeting asked if they could leave, he made them stay. That decision discouraged the employees from preparing more than minimally for subsequent meetings.

among other factors, but in this chapter we'll consider the following basic responsibilities of the facilitator:

- Share information
- Conduct discussion
- Manage participation
- Get a decision
- Plan action and make assignments

In addition, the facilitator will have to be ready and able to deal with departures from the agenda, notably tangents and delays.

Tangents

The facilitator is responsible for guiding the way and preventing tangents that would delay the journey or digress from the path. But that guidance should not prevent divergent thinking and useful contributions that may not, at first, seem directly relevant to the topic under consideration.

Skillful facilitating allows for flexibility and permits tangents that are beneficial. (Yes, that's a judgment call!)

The facilitator should know that it's OK to depart from the agenda if more important issues arise. He or she should then politely ask the permission of the group to allow the digression.

Doing so shows them that it's *their* meeting, that the process and the outcomes depend on them.

Delays

If it's taking longer to cover the agenda than you'd expected and planned, it might be wise to put some items off for another meeting, in order to end at the scheduled stop time. This is especially true if some of the participants have appointments immediately after the stop time or if the room is scheduled for another activity at that time.

However, if the meeting is going well, if the participants are working together effectively and seem to have the desire and energy to continue, it would make sense to consider going beyond the stop time. If so, then poll the participants: all of them should agree to continue or you should stop and set a date and time for another meeting to continue the agenda.

Set and Maintain an Appropriate Pace

The facilitator should establish an appropriate pace. One of the key characteristics of a successful meeting is productivity or, at least, progress. Conversely, two common complaints about bad meetings are that participants become bored and that participants get confused.

One way to get a group energized is to structure the agenda so that the meeting begins with a few quick items. There could also be an alternation of long and short items, to keep the meeting from bogging down. The facilitator may find it wise to modify the order of items if it seems that the pace of the meeting is slowing down.

The facilitator should always be looking around the room, alert to any signs that he or she should slow things down or speed them up. The facilitator should also be sensitive to any signs of overload, having to hold onto too much information and/or too many ideas and opinions at one time. He or she should also glance at the timekeeper regularly, ready for a signal to move toward a decision or to close the discussion.



The Meter Is Running

We all know that time is money—and that meetings cost a lot of both.

As a very real reminder of this basic fact, you may want to put a kitchen timer where all participants can see it. Then, for each agenda item, the facilitator can set it for the time allowed, as indicated on the agenda, to show that “the meter is running.”

The use of a “meter” also makes the job of the timekeeper easier. In fact, if participants share responsibility for keeping the meeting running according to schedule, you may find that the group doesn’t even need this role!

Good cooperation between timekeeper and facilitator can help the group avoid what Eli Mina, author of *The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings* (New York: AMACOM, 2000), calls the “rush-hour syndrome”—squeezing too much agenda into too little time at the end of a meeting. With a timed agenda and a diligent timekeeper, the facilitator can lead the group to decide what items to conclude and what items to continue at another meeting.

The facilitator should always keep in mind that *purposes* are more important than *minutes*, that it’s more important for the group to be *effective* than *efficient*. After all, what makes more sense—for the group to hurry a discussion to fit the allotted time and make a decision prematurely or to take the time necessary to reach an informed and considered decision?



Don't Let the Clock Run Your Meetings

The group should never allow the clock to limit discussions or drive decisions. Heed the old adage, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.” Time is not a valid excuse for avoiding hard work. The agenda schedule is not carved in stone, so don’t allow it to be used to justify skimping on discussion or rushing a decision. Do it right—now, or later at another meeting.

Share Information

The facilitator initiates an agenda item by referring to the agenda to state the expected outcomes, explain how the group will deal with the item, and remind participants of the amount of time scheduled for discussion. (We’ll

describe some methods for discussion in Chapter 6.)

For each agenda item, the facilitator should call for at least a little information. When you develop the agenda, you indicate who is responsible for providing information. It could be the “resident expert” or it could be somebody who’s very good at organizing and explaining. It could be you, especially if you’re most informed about the item.

As we’ve cautioned earlier in this book, you should avoid using meetings to provide a lot of information. It’s usually expecting too much of participants to absorb and process large amounts of information quickly enough and well enough to discuss an item and reach a decision. (The neologism “infobesity” comes to mind here.) That’s why it’s wisest to provide information in advance of the meeting, so participants can arrive informed and prepared to discuss and decide.

If you’ve scheduled a report or a presentation, you should also have given the person responsible a time limit and indicated it on the agenda. The facilitator and the timekeeper must then hold the person to that time limit.

After the informant or the facilitator has provided the information, the facilitator should ask for additional information, concerns, or questions. Any concerns or questions should be about the information and not to express opinions or offer suggestions; opinions and suggestions should be kept for the discussion.

Conduct Discussion

Conducting discussions is often the most demanding of the facilitator’s responsibilities. As a friend once noted, “There are two types of conductors: one drives a train down the track and the other manages to get all the instruments in the orchestra to play together.” The same is true of conducting a meeting—except that a facilitator is expected to do both, to keep to the schedule and to help all members of the group work together.

To conduct a discussion properly, the facilitator must do the following:

- Open the discussion
- Manage participation
- Keep the discussion focused
- Close the discussion

It's so simple—on paper. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the role of facilitator requires many skills.

To Discuss or Not to Discuss?

You've planned the agenda and indicated which items you expect the group will discuss. However, sometimes reality refuses to fit our plans.

There may be issues that don't generate any discussion because of lack of interest or lack of information or for other reasons. Or, more frequently, issues for which you'd planned no discussion seem to be a hot button.

The facilitator is on the spot to make decisions based on "the will of the people" and his or her own judgment. You should refrain from following your instinct to intervene and manage the situation. Allow the group and the facilitator to arrive at a decision—if you want meeting roles to have any authority and responsibility and if you want participation to mean passionate engagement.

However, if the facilitator and other members of the group seem unable to reach an agreement, the facilitator must decide. If he or she seems to be caught, don't prolong the agony: if the facilitator looks to you for help, suggest a decision in as few words as possible—or even a gesture. Then, expect the facilitator to resume control of the meeting and move on.

Open the Discussion

The facilitator then opens the discussion. If the environment feels right and the topic is interesting, that may be all that's necessary to start a discussion. However, if participants are slow to contribute, the facilitator may ask them open-ended questions, so participants cannot answer with just "yes" or "no." He or she may need to keep repeating the main questions, patiently, to draw out contributions.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, if a discussion isn't going well, the facilitator can change the dynamics by dividing the group into dyads or triads. He or she gives the clusters one or two questions and a few minutes to discuss them, then asks each cluster to share the results with the rest of the group.

A good facilitator is someone who can bring out the best in the participants. This happens only if the facilitator shows appreciation and respect for each participant for his or her unique experience, knowledge, and skills. People who feel appreciated and respected tend to contribute.

As participants contribute, the facilitator listens. As necessary, he or she asks for clarification. That may mean asking participants to restate, to define terms, to explain, to provide reasons, to cite facts, to give examples.

The facilitator should encourage involvement, by exploring with queries (e.g., "What else?" and "Any other thoughts?") and asking follow-up questions (e.g., "Why?"). Some people recommend crediting contributors (e.g., "Let's get back to

A Little Insurance

It can be difficult to start a discussion—and even more difficult if the lack of participation makes the facilitator feel awkward. It's tough in that situation to come up with effective questions.

If you suspect that it might be difficult for the facilitator to get a discussion started, it's a good idea to jot down a few open-ended questions for the facilitator to ask. Just having the questions on hand could give him or her extra confidence.



A Discussion Is in the Cards

If participants are hesitant to engage in a discussion, here's a trick with cards.

The facilitator distributes index cards and asks participants to note their comments or ideas on the cards. After a few minutes, the facilitator collects the cards, shuffles them, and distributes a few to each participant. Then, in turn, the participants read the cards to the group. The scribe then records the contributions, as usual. That process may generate reactions. If not, you at least have the comments and ideas that a conventional discussion would have generated.





It Takes Two (or Three) to Untangle

Sometimes members hesitate to participate because they worry about expressing themselves well. If that's the case with any member of your group, the facilitator can use a variant of the index card technique.

He or she can break the group into twos or threes and give each an index card for recording their thoughts or concerns. This allows the people in each cluster to work together through any difficulties in expressing what's on their minds. Then, after a few minutes, the facilitator collects the cards and reads them aloud. He or she can then resolve any remaining clarity problems while reading them. The scribe then records the contributions.

what Adriana suggested. How could we build on that idea?" and "Sean mentioned something interesting. Who would like to react to his statement?"). However, this may be unnecessary—and even potentially dangerous, because linking people and contributions can draw attention to the people and away from the contributions and the collaboration. If the group builds on a contribution, the participant will feel appreciated—and that's what really matters.

To draw out shy participants, the facilitator can ask them for their thoughts about the item under discussion. Or, better yet, he or she can circle the participants, so the natural dynamics of collaboration induces the quiet participants to join in.

To quiet those who talk too much, offer a thank-you and ask for the comments of those who haven't yet spoken.

At all times, everybody—the facilitator, the other participants, and you—should keep the following questions in mind for guidance:

- "Are we focusing on the issue?"
- "Are we being as productive as possible?"
- "Are we spending our time appropriately at this moment?"

The facilitator should summarize any lengthy contribution—and immediately check on the accuracy of that summary. He or

she should also contain digressions, by asking participants to return to the point or by summarizing contributions to guide the group back to the point.

As the facilitator helps the participants express their ideas, concerns, opinions, and reactions, he or she should be scanning the faces of the other participants, attentive to any signs that somebody might

not be understanding. If so, then he or she works to clarify.

The scribe records the main points of the discussion, on a flip chart or other chosen medium, to allow participants to follow along better and make corrections or request clarification. He or she should try to reduce contributions to their essence, to document the discussion concisely. However, to the extent practical, he or she should use the key words used by the contributor. If a contribution is too long, the scribe should ask the person to summarize it.

As we noted in Chapter 3, grammar and spelling don't matter here. What matters is to maintain a running record of the discussion that all participants can follow.

Post and Point

If discussions often slow down, go off track, or even get derailed, consider this idea. Print the three guiding questions presented here on a sheet of flipchart paper and then post the sheet just before a meeting begins, as you post your agenda and your ground rules (if you do). Then, when a discussion stalls or starts taking a turn, the facilitator (or any other group members) can point to the questions. A word to the wise is sufficient; a gesture is more efficient.



Deal with the Digression

When the group is digressing, it's generally best for the facilitator to try to bring the group back to the point. But sometimes it's more appropriate to deal with the digression.

The authors of *The Team Handbook* (p. 7-22) suggest that the facilitator comment on the digression: "We've had trouble sticking to this point. Is there something about it that makes it so easy to avoid?"

The answers may be surprising and reveal something worth pursuing. If not, then at least the group has dealt with the digression and can return to the issue at hand.



The scribe should print in large letters (at least an inch high, depending on the size of the room), allowing a lot of space around contributions, to allow other points to be added. It's usually good to use markers of various colors, for easier reading—although too many colors can make the chart busy and confusing. Blue or black are best as main colors; red should be used only to highlight, as it's harder to read from a distance.

The scribe should stand to the side of the chart or board as much as possible, to not obscure the writing. He or she should regularly scan the faces of the group, to check for signs that participants are having trouble reading the writing.

As the scribe fills a sheet of paper, he or she should tear it from the flipchart and tape it to a wall or tack it to a bulletin board, putting the sheets up in order and/or numbering them.

The role of scribe is obviously not just a clerical function. In fact, in meetings with a lot of participation, the scribe takes a more active role to help the facilitator with his or her responsibilities.

As mentioned above, the facilitator should focus on maintaining the pace and the flow of the interaction and ensuring full and productive participation. The scribe can make sure that he or she isn't missing anything in all the activity. This is especially important when there are a lot of participants contributing and when it's necessary to clarify and paraphrase and sum up contributions. The scribe and the facilitator should be constantly checking with each other, to confirm their understanding of contributions and to control the pace and flow of the discussion.

Manage Participation

A primary responsibility of the facilitator is to manage participation. This means that he or she is to make sure that each person is allowed the opportunity to contribute. It's essential to prevent any member from dominating and to engage all members in the discussion.

Every member of the group should understand and accept that he or she shares responsibility for the meeting. One way to



Job Description for Meetings

Make copies of this guide to distribute to people in advance of the meeting, with the agenda.

Responsibilities of Meeting Participants:

- Read the agenda carefully prior to the meeting.
- Prepare to participate in the meeting.
- Arrive on time with your copy of the agenda.
- Contribute—and encourage your fellow participants to contribute.
- Pay attention to what others contribute and respect them.
- Build on others' contributions.
- Work toward the objectives of the meeting.

help ensure that understanding and acceptance of responsibility is by providing every person that you invite to the meeting with a list of responsibilities, as illustrated in the sidebar.

The facilitator should encourage expression of differences of perspective and opinion. The best way to do this is to avoid judging any contributions. In fact, it's the responsibility of the facilitator to help the group get the most out of every contribution. He or she should make sure that all members of the group understand each contribution, asking the contributor to explain or paraphrase if necessary. Then, he or she should accentuate the value in the contribution: e.g., "That's a perspective we've been missing here" or "What's most interesting in your comment is...."

Participants should be encouraged to do the same, to seek out value in every contribution and to respect and appreciate it. A friend once commented, "A relationship is good when two people have the best intentions toward each other and assume that the other also has the best intentions." That truth seems to apply to meetings as well: members of the group should always work for the interests of the group and assume that all share that spirit.

Part of the facilitator's responsibility to manage participation is to direct traffic. What this means and how important it is depend on the group and the purpose of its activity.

"In an orderly meeting, only one member speaks at a time," according to Eli Mina in *The Complete Handbook of Business*

Meetings. You've probably participated in great meetings that were a little less than orderly. That's especially true when the conversation (to use the Michael Begeman term) is a "conversation for possibility," to maximize creativity and generate ideas. And there's a lot of productive territory between *orderly* and *chaotic*.

Sometimes a little disorder is good, allowing enthusiasm and energy to drive the discussion. But there may be times when the facilitator will need to control the flow, using signals like a traffic cop—a hand up or extended palm outward to stop someone from talking and a hand signaling another to continue. (Silent signals are generally better than adding more words to the noise.)

But the advice offered by Mina is sound in principle: "Interruptions are avoided, except when absolutely needed. Regardless of how contentious the issues are, civility and mutual respect are maintained." His basic guideline could be posted at every meeting—"Discussions are 'hard on the issues' but 'soft on the people.'"

The facilitator should help the group handle not only the "hard" but also the "soft."

As we've emphasized from Chapter 1, meetings are work. And you emphasize that fact in your planning, in your agenda, and in all else.

But it's important to keep in mind the words of wisdom quoted at the beginning of Chapter 3: "There is a legitimate social component to meetings.... You should never overlook the social side of work rituals—even in meetings that are 'all business.'" All participants should feel comfortable around each other. A certain amount of conversation and joking is natural and healthy, if it makes the group more productive.

The facilitator should allow and even encourage this social side of the group—but also know when and how to limit the socializing and return to the business of the meeting.

Keep the Discussion Focused and Progressing

The facilitator and the scribe work together to keep the discussion focused on the agenda item at hand and progressing



Thumb Time-Saver

If several participants offer contributions that are supportive but do nothing to advance the discussion (“Yeah, I agree with the statement that...”), the facilitator may want to see if the group is close to closure on the item.

A good way to do so is to ask participants to simply give a thumb signal of their position:

- thumbs up: I’m ready for closure
- thumbs down: I still have serious concerns
- thumbs sideways: I’m neutral, I could close or continue

It’s a fast way for everyone to know how the others feel about the issue. Of course, if anybody gives thumbs down, then the facilitator should certainly encourage the expression of these concerns.

toward the objective(s).

We often talk about keeping a discussion “on track”—as if it were a train. Well, the problem with that analogy is that it’s simplistic. Since trains run on rails, they’re either *on track* or *off track*. Discussions, in contrast, can wander all around a subject without truly being “off track”—all the while they’re not really “on track.” So, it makes more sense to continually monitor the discussion in terms of the results, to keep it focused on the objective(s).

Sometimes a facilitator will be so intent on keeping a discussion focused, however, that the group misses out on valuable opportunities. On occasion, even often, a participant will bring up an idea or make a suggestion that’s really good, but not really germane to the discussion. Should the facilitator allow the group to pursue it or does the group continue on track?

There’s a third option—run a parking lot. When a participant contributes something that seems to be outside the scope of the discussion, the facilitator can indicate to the scribe to write it down. The facilitator may make that decision or may ask the group, with a simple question—“parking lot?” Also, any participant may propose relegating a contribution to the parking lot, a suggestion that the facilitator and/or the group may then accept or reject.



Parking lot An area—e.g., on a separate page of a flipchart or on a board—where the scribe records any comments, ideas, or suggestions that are off the topic at hand or otherwise outside the scope of the discussion. Also known as an *idea bin*, a *tangent bin*, or an *issues board*.

The parking lot accumulates contributions so they aren't forgotten but don't lead the group off on tangents. Recording contributions that are outside the discussion scope respects concerns of the group and assures participants that the points

recorded will be addressed, although not at present.

Make sure to address these points in some way as soon as is practical. Otherwise, participants will perceive that the parking lot is where contributions go to die and they'll be less likely to offer any comments or ideas that are not on the straight and narrow path of the discussion.

It Takes All Kinds: Group Dynamics

Don't expect all participants to contribute equally and in the same ways. They each bring different strengths and weaknesses to the table.



Smart Managing

Drive the Vehicles in Your Parking Lot

The parking lot is a meeting equivalent of the organization's suggestion box: it can generate great opportunities—if the ideas and comments don't just remain there, neglected.

It's a good policy to schedule a discussion in your next meeting whenever there are vehicles in the parking lot. Encourage the participants to "take 'em out for a spin." Some of the contributions won't make it around the block—but you may find one that runs great.

This method of dealing with off-topic contributions, making them the topic of a special discussion, has three advantages:

- It allows you to make the most of the brains and creativity of your employees (twice).
- It shows that you appreciate all contributions.
- It enables your employees to be involved in deciding the fate of their contributions.

A meeting is often the ultimate in teamwork. An effective and efficient meeting depends not only on each of the participants but also on their interpersonal dynamics. The greatest danger is not *conflict*, as many managers believe, but *groupthink*—the tendency of a group of people to seek unanimous agreement in spite of facts that would contradict such agreement.

This phenomenon was identified by Irving L. Janis, author of *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972) and *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2nd edition, 1982). Janis notes in his first study:

The more amiability and esprit de corps there is among members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink. ... The social constraint consists of the members' strong wish to preserve the harmony of the group, which inclines them to avoid creating any discordant arguments or schisms.

Groupthink “A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action,” according to Irving Janis, a social psychologist at Yale University who identified and studied this phenomenon.



The following conditions promote groupthink:

- The group is highly cohesive.
- The group members have worked together for a long time.
- The group values harmony above all else.
- The group members are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision.

How can you recognize groupthink? These are some signs that you might notice in meetings:

- Whenever a member with authority, power, or perceived expertise expresses a position, the others support that position.
- Members consider the risks and weaknesses of a position insufficiently or not at all.
- Members rationalize group views, including poor decisions.
- Unanimity is very important.
- Members seem reluctant to express their feelings.
- The group examines few or no alternatives.
- Members are quick to dismiss different perspectives.
- Members tend not to be critical of each other's ideas.
- The group doesn't seek the opinion of experts (especially from the outside).
- Members try to keep out information that conflicts with the group perspective.
- Members exert pressure on fellow members who question or disagree.
- The group doesn't make contingency plans.

If you suspect a tendency toward groupthink, how do you deal with it? Better yet, how do you prevent that tendency? Here are some general suggestions, for you and for the facilitator:

- Encourage members to raise objections and concerns.
- Assign one or more members to play the role of critical evaluator or devil's advocate.
- Promote an environment open to questions and alternative perspectives.
- Divide the group into smaller groups to discuss, then compare the results.
- Get input from experts outside the group.
- Require the group to develop a certain number of options before moving toward a decision.
- Instruct the group to first develop a list of criteria for evaluating options—and then ensure that the members use those criteria.

Groupthink vs. Consensus

Groupthink and consensus may seem similar, but there's a key distinction. It's *groupthink* when all the members of a group seem to agree on a decision, but there are some who are censoring themselves and not expressing concerns or who have not resolved some differences they consider important and who are "just going along with the crowd" because they feel pressure to agree and to avoid disrupting the unity. It's *consensus* when all members of the group have thoroughly explored a range of choices, considered the risks and weaknesses of each option, and resolved all important differences.



One general way to counter any tendency to groupthink is by helping participants understand and appreciate the value of critical thinking, disagreement, and diversity of thinking. Encourage facilitators to elicit a variety of contributions, encourage thoughtful consideration of all suggestions, and praise members who show the courage to think independently.

Another way is to avoid expressing your opinions and offering suggestions until the other participants have contributed and to encourage and welcome critical reactions to those opinions and suggestions—not always easy, but definitely necessary.

Close the Discussion

The facilitator brings the discussion to a close when the timekeeper indicates only a few minutes remain of the allotted time or when interest either wanes or waxes too hot to be productive.

As the timekeeper signals, the facilitator might say simply, "OK, we have three minutes left. Are there any points we haven't considered?" Then, in the last minute or so, he or she can recap the main points of the discussion by referring to the notes kept on display by the scribe.

It's a little more involved if the facilitator decides to end a discussion early, for any reason. If it's because participation has slowed, he or she should ask the members to indicate by a show of hands if they feel ready to reach a decision or (if you've specified a managerial decision) to turn the meeting over to you. If, in contrast, the discussion has gotten too hot, the facilitator can

propose a choice, if a decision is not urgent: to table the discussion until the next meeting or to move on to a decision.

It's generally not the responsibility of the facilitator to determine what should be done, but rather to recognize that it may be time for the group to decide on the next steps.

Get a Decision

For most agenda items, the purpose of a discussion is to arrive at some decision—if only to consider the items further at another time. In fact, it could be argued that no meeting should end without a decision. (And no, the decision to adjourn doesn't count!)

Types of Decisions

As suggested in Chapter 2, you should let participants know in advance, on the agenda, how a decision will be made:

- **Managerial**—you make the call!
- **Vote by majority or plurality**—just count the votes.
- **Consensus**—cooperative development of a decision that's acceptable enough for all members of a group to agree to support.
- **Delegation**—selected members of the group make the decision.

Managerial Decision. (Because you may be meeting with other managers or with people from outside your unit or the organization, you may not be the top dog. However, because most meetings for which you're responsible will be with your employees, we'll word this section accordingly.)

Before the discussion starts, clarify the purpose. If you'd like the group to explore options for you to consider when you make the decision, make that clear, so they will understand your expectations and their responsibilities. If you've reached a tentative decision that you want to "try out" with the group, make that clear, so they know that you're inviting their perspectives and help in identifying aspects that you may have missed.

Generally, you will probably want to make your decision later, after the meeting. But if the discussion has allowed you to reach a decision and you want to announce it, proceed with care. After a group discussion of an issue, a managerial decision may seem abrupt and autocratic. So, you should take a few minutes to frame your decision and promote closure.

First, thank the participants for helping you explore the issue from all perspectives. Then, sum up the best points raised during the discussion and how you've considered each of them. Next, announce your decision and outline the actions you're planning based on that decision. You don't need to be specific about your plans, but just show that you've thought things out beyond your decision.

As shown in the continuum in Chapter 2 (Figure 2-2), there are various modes of making managerial decisions:

- The manager makes the decision and announces it.
- The manager makes the decision and explains it.
- The manager makes the decision and discusses implementation issues.
- The manager makes a tentative decision and discusses it before finalizing it.
- The manager and the group discuss the issue and then the manager makes the decision.
- The manager delegates the decision to the group, with limits.
- The manager delegates the decision to the group, to the full limit of his or her authority.

These more moderate approaches may be a good way to share managerial authority with the group—if you have a very good rapport with your employees, if they understand the continuum, and if they know your reasons for taking the approach that you've chosen. Otherwise, be careful, as members of the group may view these approaches as paternalistic, as being only the semblance of shared governance, as conciliatory—or even as a sign of weakness.

If you choose to make a decision in a meeting, you should have strong reasons to do so and you should handle them in the following way:

- Give your reasons for making the decision yourself.
- Express your appreciation for the assistance and support of the group.
- Cite the good points raised in the discussion.
- Present your decision.
- Outline the actions you plan or ask the group to discuss possible actions.
- Move on to the next item on the agenda.

If you indicate on the agenda that the group will be responsible for making a decision, you may decide to change your mind. You have that right, of course, particularly if circumstances change. But that reversal—which is essentially revoking a delegated responsibility—would require the utmost of sensitivity and tact.

Signal the facilitator that you would like the floor. Then, proceed in the manner outlined above, but with even greater care.

Decision by Vote. Perhaps the biggest disadvantage of voting is that it leads to an all-or-nothing perspective: every choice wins or loses. Sure, the result is a decision—and if what matters most is reaching a decision quickly, then voting works well.

When there are “winners” and “losers,” there’s a risk of psychological and emotional effects that may undermine the effects of the result. Those who did not vote for the winning choice may not be very committed to supporting the outcome. They may even resist implementation of the decision, openly or covertly, actively or passively. Factions may form.

Another disadvantage with voting is that the group may not address all concerns and answer all questions. It should be remembered that the purpose of a discussion is not only to help the group reach a decision but also to make participants aware of potential problems with that decision. That awareness helps the group plan more effectively to act on the decision.

Why Take Chances?



If you want to avoid a “winners-losers” split in the group, it’s best to use consensus to reach a decision. (With any kind of voting, there are always “winners” and “losers.”)

If you’re concerned about the possibility of groupthink, it makes sense to have the vote be private. It might take a minute or two longer than a show of hands, but it allows participants to vote freely, without feeling pressure from others.

It’s simple to do. The facilitator distributes an index card to each participant. The participants write their vote on the card, fold it, and toss it into the middle of the table. The facilitator collects the cards and then reads each one and the scribe tallies the vote on the flipchart, whiteboard, or blackboard.

If the decision is to be put to a vote, you can reduce the disadvantages by allowing and promoting extensive discussion, so all participants have the opportunity to present their perspectives and raise questions. If it seems that a vote could divide the group and yet reaching consensus would be difficult or even impossible, the facilitator should encourage the participants to propose compromises.

As a last resort, you or the top authority could intervene and make the decision. Even if the decision is no different from what would have resulted from a vote, a managerial decision allows the opportunity to sum up all of the good points raised in the discussion and to thank the participants for their efforts. The facilitator then resumes leadership of the meeting, so he or she can guide the group in planning to act on the decision.

Decision by Consensus. Consensus is the quintessential team approach to making decisions. The idea of making decisions by consensus has become more popular in recent years. But how that idea plays out in practice shows some misconceptions.

As defined above, consensus is the cooperative development of a decision that’s acceptable enough for all members of a group to agree to support. Since any decision must be acceptable to all, every member has veto power.

In theory at least, that means that every member knows that

the group cannot reach a decision without his or her approval. As a result, everyone can focus on contributing to the discussion without worrying about any rush to decision that might run over or around any issues.

In some groups, however, consensus can cause negative feelings, as some members may exert pressure on others to “fall in line” and “go with the flow” and “not make waves.” In other words, the feeling of unity that is the strength of this approach to making decisions may be used to circumvent the spirit of consensus. This is what Eli Mina, in *The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings*, calls “the tyranny of the minority.” The facilitator and you should be alert to any signs of pressure within the group.

Sometimes the problem with consensus is quite the opposite. Consensus can take a lot of time—especially when there are serious concerns to be addressed.

The facilitator must guide the participants to make a decision. He or she should focus on identifying the areas of disagreement, with probing questions: “What aspect of this issue is keeping us from moving forward? What can we not support at this point?”

Consensus does not mean there's no conflict. But it requires that the members of the group be committed to putting the time and energy into working through any conflict. It requires considering all perspectives and concerns while trying to arrive at a decision that all members can support. Consensus decisions are in the spirit of participants working together toward a common goal, not two or more groups of adversaries pursuing different objectives.

If you've indicated “vote” or “consensus” for an agenda item, but you don't feel strongly about your choice, or if you haven't indicated an approach, you can get guidance on how to make the decision on the item from the following quick check. The facilitator asks the participants to raise their hands if the decision matters to them. If no hands go up, it's probably OK to vote on it. If there are a few hands, then it's probably better to use consensus to make the decision.

The key value of consensus is that the group works to incorporate members' reservations and concerns into the proposal under consideration. The result is that consensus can produce more creative and more robust decisions than voting, where members often compromise to gain votes for a proposal.

Compromise is a process of "giving up": I'll give up X if you give up Y. Consensus is a "both-and" process: How can the group both support X and address Y concerns?

It takes particular skill to facilitate consensus decision-making. Here are some simple techniques:

- Frame the issue so all participants can understand it and the importance of making a decision. This is crucial because it determines or at least greatly influences the orientation of the discussion.
- As the participants discuss the issue, help them shape any option into words that express it adequately, clearly, succinctly, and fairly.
- Sum up any agreements, to mark and maintain progress toward a decision. For example, "So now we agree that _____."
- Establish a "balance sheet" from time to time, especially when the discussion lags or stalls: "OK, so we agree on _____, but we're still not together on _____. What concerns do we need to settle?"
- If it seems that the group may not achieve consensus, ask, "What will happen if all of us can't agree on this issue?" or "Should we abandon consensus and put it to a vote or turn the decision over to our manager?"

Delegation. This way of handling a decision is relatively simple, at least in concept. A number of participants are given the authority and responsibility for making a decision. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this is a good option particularly when certain members of the group are generally considered best qualified to make the decision or when they're the only people affected by the decision.

Check the Decision

If the participants are to make a decision (by vote or by consensus), the facilitator must first check the decision. This is a simple action that, if neglected, can bog down a meeting and frustrate the participants. To check a decision means that the facilitator states the decision in full sentences and makes sure that all participants interpret the sentences in the same way.

Of course, if you as the manager are to make the decision, there's no need to check it, at least not for the usual reason. However, because communication is essential, it's still a good idea to express your decision in terms that all of the participants can understand. Also, since the note-taker will be recording the decision for the minutes, this is your opportunity to word your decision as you would want anybody in the organization to understand it.

We've all been in meetings where people were unsure about the options even as they were making their decision. The facilitator should make sure that all members of the group understand exactly what they're doing.

What if the group can't reach a decision? That depends on the situation. If the group has thoroughly considered all of the aspects of the issue and especially if time is short, it may be up to you or the top authority to make the decision, to exercise your managerial responsibility. However, if you believe that the group would benefit from further consideration of the issue, it may be advisable to postpone the decision and schedule another discussion.

But, in that event, the facilitator should assign to the participants the task of gathering information and/or input from others outside the group. Depending on the areas that seem to have been insufficiently explored (e.g., finances, time, logistics, resources, expertise and skills, psychological impact, or whatever), the facilitator might divide the participants into teams and assign a specific responsibility to each. Another possibility is to assign a team to each of the options among which the group is

unable to decide, to prepare the best and most compelling case for the next meeting.

Plan Action and Make Assignments

When a decision is made, through whatever process, it means little if it doesn't result in action. So, the next step after making a decision is planning to act on that decision.

The facilitator should do the following:

- Help the group determine what action(s) to take on the decision and, if necessary, the approach(es).
- Establish, through consensus, if possible, the time by which to take the action(s).
- Assign a person or people to be responsible for the action(s). It's best to assign a specific task to a specific person, not an area of responsibility to a team.
- Specify what's expected as a result of the action(s).

Then, after the scribe and the note-keeper have recorded the actions, approaches, deadlines, assignments, and expectations, the facilitator moves on to the next item on the agenda.

Maybe the group has finished all of the items on the agenda, made decisions, and planned actions. If so, congratulations! Or maybe the time scheduled for the agenda items is almost over. (That happens to the best of groups with the best of managers—and it's not necessarily a sign of failure.) In either case, the facilitator should bring the meeting to a close. To do so properly takes a little time, some planning, and a little guidance. The next chapter can't provide any time, but it can help you plan and it can provide guidance for the facilitator.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 4

- ☐ The group should review the agenda at the start of the meeting, to link it to decisions and assignments from the previous meeting, for continuity, and revision as necessary.

- ❑ Trust the facilitator, the scribe, the timekeeper, and the note-keeper to run the meeting and trust the other participants to work with them.
- ❑ The facilitator should follow the agenda, as you've mapped out the meeting, keeping to the schedule, if possible, but understanding that a meeting is a journey, not just a destination with a deadline.
- ❑ To conduct a discussion properly, the facilitator opens the discussion, keeps the discussion focused, manages participation, and closes the discussion. It's a simple process, but it requires great skill.
- ❑ Every item on the agenda should lead to some action. The facilitator should lead the group through the following steps:
 - Determine the action(s) to take and, if necessary, the approach(es).
 - Establish the time by which to take the action(s).
 - Assign a person or people to be responsible for the action(s).
 - Specify what's expected as a result of the action(s).



Closing the Meeting and Following Up

Although it may not be true that “all’s well that ends well,” it’s important to close a meeting properly. That’s why we’ve devoted about three-fourths of this chapter to closing the meeting.

Final Matters

You’ve developed a strong agenda and invited the right people to the meeting. Your facilitator has helped all of the participants contribute to productive discussions, supported by the scribe, the timekeeper, and the note-taker. It’s been a great meeting—so far.

But the outcome might be disappointing if it doesn’t end right. That’s the focus of this chapter, to help you turn all of that preparation and those contributions into results.

End on Time

End your meeting on time—even if it starts late. You can’t

always control the beginning of the time frame, but you should try to control the end.

There are at least four good reasons to end your meeting at the scheduled time:

1. It shows respect for the participants, who have schedules to keep and other work to do.
2. It encourages participants to work efficiently—and rewards them for doing so.
3. It helps avoid ending meetings on a frustrating or disappointing note, as most meetings that run over the set time tend to prove the law of diminishing returns: it takes more time and energy to accomplish anything.
4. It's a symptom of poor management if you can't plan either to achieve your objectives within the allotted time or to allow enough time to achieve your objectives.

The timekeeper should signal the facilitator that the time to conclude is approaching, just as he or she does toward the end of each part of the agenda. In fact, as noted in Chapter 2, the time to begin the conclusion should be indicated on the agenda.

The facilitator then begins concluding the meeting. An appropriate conclusion consists of four points:

- Summarize the main points, decisions, actions, and assignments.
- Sketch the agenda for the next meeting—if any.
- Express appreciation.
- Evaluate the meeting.

In this chapter we'll proceed through this five-part conclusion point by point. As elsewhere, we'll outline general principles and offer some specific recommendations. But, as we've emphasized, you should bear in mind that meetings are microcosms of the culture and spirit of the workplace and they should be structured and conducted according to their specific purposes. Logically, then, a meeting should conclude in a way that's consistent with how it began and how it progressed until the end.

Keeping Them Updated

A TV drama of the early 1980s, *Hill Street Blues*, began every episode in the first four seasons with a meeting of the police officers before they began their shift. It was purely informational, as the desk sergeant updated them on the situation in their precinct.

Then, he generally ended in a way that was most appropriate for the culture (action in a tough environment) and his personality (gruff but affectionate), with a few words to motivate them—"Let's roll!"—and to remind them of the dangers—"And hey, let's be careful out there." It was a perfect way to end meetings in the spirit of that workplace.



Summarize the Main Points, Decisions, Actions, and Assignments

One of the biggest problems with meetings is that there's a lot of talk but not much action afterwards or even too much action and too few results. The results of discussions can be so vague that participants don't know who's to do what and when. Sometimes two or more people take on the same task while other tasks go undone.

To avoid this unfortunate situation, you should build your agenda around decisions and actions, as discussed in Chapter 2, and, as discussed in Chapter 4 the group should understand every decision and determine what action(s) to take on those decisions and who will be responsible for the action(s).

Then the facilitator should briefly sum up the meeting. The summary should relate directly to the purpose(s) of the meeting, to answer the following basic questions:

- Why did we meet?
- Did we achieve our objectives?
- What are we going to do next?

When a meeting ends with a summation of progress and an outline of future actions, there's a feeling of closure and of accomplishment. That's important: people who participate in a meeting must feel that they've done something. That will encour-

age a greater commitment to taking action on those decisions. The facilitator should briefly outline:

- The main points of the meeting
- Any agreements and decisions
- Any tasks assigned, including the people responsible for them, the time by which they are to complete their assignments, and what's expected of them

Sketch the Agenda for the Next Meeting—if Any

The assignments will naturally go onto your agenda for the next meeting: You'll be following up on those that are scheduled to be accomplished by then and you may be discussing those that are still in progress. The facilitator also asks the note-taker to jot down any unfinished business that you might want to include on the agenda.

Some meetings experts recommend that the facilitator also set a time and place for the next meeting. In certain situations, especially with a project team or a task force that is working toward long-term goals, this might be a good idea. On the other hand, to conclude a meeting by scheduling the next meeting can easily develop into a routine of meetings for the sake of meetings and/or for the purpose of motivating employees to complete their assignments. Sure, a meeting can provide extra incentive—but that's a bad habit, since it's an expensive incentive. Would you schedule meetings to motivate performance in any other areas of work activities?

It would generally make more sense for the facilitator to ask the participants when they expect to have their assignments completed. That way, the group schedules its next meeting based on reasons to meet.

It may not be possible to schedule during the meeting. There may be people who will be essential for the next meeting but who are not present to check their schedules. Some participants may have potential conflicts that they need to check before committing to a date and time. It may be hard to schedule a

room. But at least the group will arrive at a general time frame for the next meeting, so you can work out the scheduling details.

Express Appreciation

How do you feel when you've done your best, when you've put your heart and mind into a team effort, and it just ends abruptly? Well, do you want the participants of a meeting to feel the same way?

When a meeting ends, the facilitator should thank the participants:

1. Thank (again) any participants who made presentations, gave reports, or contributed in any other way that required preparation.
2. Thank the scribe, the timekeeper, and the note-taker.
3. Thank anyone assigned to a task, especially those who volunteered.
4. Thank the rest of the participants.

It's always good to show that you genuinely appreciate what members of the group contributed to the meeting. After all, those who've done their best deserve to know that you appreciate their efforts—and those who haven't contributed their all to the team effort may feel a little embarrassed and may resolve to do better the next time.

Evaluate the Meeting

The authors of *The Team Handbook* put it simply (p. 4-9): "Evaluating every meeting is key to having effective meetings." That's why we're devoting so many pages in this chapter to evaluations.

There are various methods for evaluating a meeting. In this section we'll consider a range of possibilities.

Which way is best? That depends on your situation, the people, the preparation, and other factors. You may want to experiment a little or to alternate among the methods.

By the Participants, Unwritten

The most common way of evaluating meetings is to have the participants do it. There are dozens of options.

The simplest method of evaluation is a round of feedback at the end of the meeting. You can prepare one or more simple questions for the group.

For example:

- Did you read the agenda in advance and prepare to discuss the items?
- Did you contribute to the meeting to the best of your ability?
- Do you know what you are responsible for doing as a result of this meeting?
- How could we improve the next meeting?

Another simple way to evaluate a meeting is through gestures. This method is described briefly in *The Team Handbook* (p. 4-10). The facilitator asks how participants would rate the meeting and they signal their overall evaluation with thumbs up

(good), thumbs sideways (neither good nor bad), or thumbs down (bad). Then each in turn explains his or her reasons.

A variant of this method would be to have the facilitator read a list of specific items, one by one. Another variant would be to use either of these approaches, but ask for reasons only from participants who gave a thumbs-down to the meeting. The facilitator could also follow up on the reactions by



Success Starts in the Mind

Intel Corporation, as mentioned in Chapter 2, has been cited as an organization that takes meetings very seriously. A poster on the walls of conference rooms in Intel factories and offices lists simple questions: "Do you know the purpose of this meeting? Do you have an agenda? Do you know your role?"

At the close of meetings, participants are encouraged to mentally answer questions posted on conference room walls: Why was I here? What was my role? Was I well prepared? What was resolved?

asking for any suggestions for improvement.

A more open method of eliciting feedback is round-robin comments. The facilitator asks each participant in turn to share his or her reactions with the others. This method is especially good when participation has been uneven, because it encourages more reserved members of the group to contribute, providing perspectives that otherwise might not come forth.

A less structured method is a general discussion: just ask for reactions and participants volunteer their comments. This works well if other general discussions have been balanced and at least moderately orderly.

The facilitator can also provide some focus for the round-robin or general discussion by asking questions. They can be comprehensive—What did we do that worked well? What could we have done better?—or specific—How could the agenda have been improved? What could we do to promote more participation?

When participants share their reactions, the facilitator should guide the discussion just as he or she would guide discussion of agenda items. By probing for clarification, by paraphrasing, and by following up with questions, the facilitator should try to elicit suggestions for improving meetings.

Whatever method of oral evaluation you use, the facilitator should ask the scribe to record all comments and suggestions. It might also be good for the note-taker to keep track as well, since participants can become quite animated when sharing their reactions.

All of these methods should end with agreement on at least one thing to do to improve the next meeting.

By the Participants, in Writing

Evaluations in writing offer several advantages over the methods described previously:

- Participants may express things in writing that they would not mention in a group.
- Participants may express themselves better and more

completely in writing than orally.

- Writing provides direct documentation of reactions, not captured and summarized by the scribe and/or the note-taker.
- You can usually cover more items in written form than in a discussion.
- You can better direct the input you want through the format you choose.

And no, written evaluations don't necessarily take a lot of time, either to prepare or to conduct.

However, there are disadvantages. One is that many written comments are difficult to understand and/or don't provide sufficient basis for taking action. Another is that it's more difficult to share the information with the group and it takes someone time and effort to analyze the evaluations and present the essence. Finally, most groups strongly prefer evaluating orally.

For these reasons, it's probably best to use written evaluations only if verbal methods won't work for some reason, such as if some participants won't speak out frankly. You should also decide who will read and analyze the evaluations and how you and the group will work with the results.

Multiple-Choice. A format that usually takes little time and provides very specific input asks participants to indicate their reaction to a statement with yes or no and/or on a Likert scale (usually three, four, or five points). The facilitator distributes a form and asks participants to rate the meeting on criteria



Likert scale An assessment method in which respondents indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. A Likert scale may present options such as “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” or “always,” “almost always,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” and “never.” Five-point scales are most common.

The scale was developed by Rensis Likert, a professor of psychology who worked in business and government before founding and directing the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

important to the group. They each complete the forms, individually and silently, and then return them to the facilitator.

Figure 5-1 shows a simple form for evaluating meetings, taken from *Communicating Effectively*, by Lani Arredondo (p. 164). The author used it for evaluating meetings in general

Plot, Don't Average



When analyzing the results of evaluations that use a Likert scale, it may be tempting to calculate an average for each item. Don't do it! Averages can minimize or conceal some important differences.

Instead, for each item show a dot plot. That way it's easy for anyone to see at a glance any significant differences among members of the group or any extremes that an average would not show.

Meeting Evaluation Form			
Circle the number of the adverb that most often applies.	Yes 1	Somewhat 2	No 3
The meeting started on time.	1	2	3
The meeting followed the agenda.	1	2	3
Everyone observed the ground rules.	1	2	3
Everyone came prepared.	1	2	3
Everyone participated.	1	2	3
Communication was courteous and constructive.	1	2	3
The meeting followed a process for solving problems.	1	2	3
The meeting accomplished the purpose.	1	2	3
Follow-up actions were done and reported on time.	1	2	3
Leadership was effective.	1	2	3
The meeting ended on time.	1	2	3

Figure 5-1. A sample meeting evaluation form

(with a scale of “usually—sometimes—rarely”), and modified it slightly to focus on a specific meeting.

You can mix rating scales, as shown (Figure 5-2) in this short evaluation form presented as an example in *The Team Handbook* (p. 4-10), which uses three-point and six-point Likert scales:

Our meeting today was:	Focused	1	2	3	4	Rambling
The pace was:	Too fast		Just right		Too slow	
Everyone got a chance to participate:		Yes	Somewhat	No		
Our purpose was:	Clear	1	2	3	4	Confused
We made good progress on our plan:		Yes	Somewhat	No		
We followed our ground rules:		Yes	Somewhat	No		

Figure 5-2. Meeting evaluation form with mixed rating scales

If you mix rating scales, be careful not to make the form too complex. Also, you could space the statements to allow for comments to be added after any or all of them.

Any evaluation form that you take from a book—even the best form, even the best book—should be modified to fit your situation and your culture. For example, you might include statements about the rules the group has set for meetings (see Chapter 3).

Here are some statements to get you started in developing your evaluation form:

- Members were notified enough in advance.
- There was an appropriate and well-organized agenda.
- The agenda was distributed in advance.
- The meeting room was scheduled and set up properly.
- The meeting was well organized.
- Everyone invited attended.
- Everyone who attended arrived on time.
- The meeting started on time.
- The manager and/or facilitator made clear the purpose(s) for the meeting.

- There was a transition from the last meeting.
- One topic was discussed at a time.
- All members participated in the discussions.
- One person had the floor at a time.
- There was an atmosphere of free expression.
- Participants showed respect for each other.
- The facilitator made good use of questions.
- The facilitator summarized the main points of each discussion.
- The discussion was relevant.
- The group considered the pros and cons of all issues.
- Decisions were made fairly.
- The meeting proceeded at an appropriate pace.
- The meeting covered the entire agenda, as planned.
- The group achieved the purpose(s) of the meeting.
- Assignments were complete and clear.
- Responsibilities were evenly distributed.
- Plans for the next meeting were announced.
- The atmosphere of the meeting was good.
- The meeting ended on time.

Remember: you should develop the evaluation to fit your people and your meetings. If you simply borrow a form, participants may feel that it's not worth it for them to put much time and thought into using it. Invite the group to modify the form so it addresses the issues that are important to them.

Open. Open-ended questions require more time and energy from participants, but they also usually provide more information. Make them as specific or as general as you like, but try to word them to be as neutral as possible, so as not to influence the participants. For example, "the agenda was appropriate" would be a better statement than "your manager created a great agenda."

One method is for the facilitator to pass around 3 x 5 or 4 x 6 index cards at the end of the meeting and ask three basic questions:

100 The Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings

1. What did you like most about this meeting?
2. What did you like least about this meeting?
3. How could we improve the next meeting?

For a more focused assessment, you could print evaluations with more specific open-ended questions, such as those listed in *The Team Handbook* (p. 4-9):

- How did this meeting go?
- How were the pace, flow, and tone of the meeting?
- Did we handle items in a reasonable sequence? Did we get stuck?
- How well did we stay on the topic?
- How well did we discuss the information? How clearly? How accurately?
- How well did we respond to each other's questions?
- What might we do differently? What should we do that we didn't do? Do more of? Do less of? Not do at all?
- What was just right and should continue as is?
- Any other comments, observations, recommendations?

Notice that the final question shifts the series of questions from focused to totally open. It's usually good to allow at least one such question, so you don't miss anything that any member of the group might consider important—and to allow members the freedom to take the evaluation in any direction.

You may want to open up the evaluation even further, by moving from the written form into a discussion. At this point, however, time becomes an issue. It could take participants five minutes to write out their comments and any discussion would likely take at least 10 minutes more. That's a big chunk of a meeting that runs only one or two hours. That's why long written evaluations are appropriate only after meetings that take one or two days, not for shorter meetings. One exception would be if you're consistently having problems with your meetings and decide to devote a meeting to evaluating the process and group dynamics.

If you decide to follow a written evaluation with a discussion, here are some suggestions.

The facilitator should first make sure that all of the participants have finished completing their forms. He or she should watch for signs that most have stopped writing and are looking up from the forms, then ask if anybody needs more time.

The discussion should be based on several selected questions, not all of them, or just start with a totally open question. If you want to discuss several questions, the facilitator should instruct the timekeeper to allow a certain amount of time for each question.

When the time for discussion expires, the facilitator should ask for the evaluation forms. Don't be surprised if some members of the group start writing again; discussions can stimulate thinking and help people remember comments that they wanted to make.

Role Players

You can also do evaluations of the facilitator, the scribe, and the timekeeper the first few times that you use these roles, to help the group understand the process better and to help everyone be more aware of the responsibilities and challenges of each role.

In *Running Effective Meetings* (p. 42), the authors suggest asking the following questions of these role players:

Facilitator

- What was it like to facilitate?
- What did you try to do to help?
- What was frustrating or challenging?

Scribe

- What was it like to be the scribe?
- What was frustrating or challenging?

Timekeeper

- What was it like to help the group deal with time issues?
- What was frustrating or challenging?

Because these individuals have special perspectives of the meeting process, you should follow up the comments on frustrations and challenges by probing for reasons and for suggestions on how to improve. Then, open up the discussion to the rest of the group for further comments.

Another way to have the role players evaluate the meeting is to have them gather afterwards to discuss the meeting. Ask each to write down any advice that he or she would offer other people chosen for that particular role. You can then share that advice with the individuals to whom you assign those roles for the next meeting and with the group at the start of the meeting.

General Guidelines

Allow appropriate time to evaluate the meeting. How long? The answer to that question is...it depends on the following factors:

- How well your meetings have gone, in general. But be careful: don't use evaluations only when there are problems. Evaluations can help good meetings become even better.
- How well the members of the group know each other.
- How much time can reasonably be allotted for the evaluation.
- The points that you want to cover in your evaluation. A lot or a few? General areas or specific items?
- The method of evaluation.

The last two points are choices that depend on the first three points.

A good rule of thumb might be to allow a maximum of 10 minutes for evaluating a meeting of two hours or longer. For a written evaluation, 10 minutes should be enough. For a discussion, you might allow a little longer. For a written evaluation followed by discussion, 15 minutes might be adequate.

Whatever method(s) you use to evaluate your meetings, emphasize that participants should focus on problems with the process and not judge or blame the people. If they comment on

No Time to Evaluate

What if you just run out of time before you can do any evaluation? Distribute a written evaluation to all the participants, as an e-mail or a memo, immediately after the meeting. It's generally not advisable to hand out forms as they leave the meeting: if you're running so late that you can't squeeze in an evaluation, participants are likely to be thinking about what they're doing next, so they tuck away the form and may forget about it. But if the form comes to them as part of their normal business activity, they're probably going to give it some time and attention.



the facilitator, the scribe, or the timekeeper, they should note what they did that was helpful and offer one suggestion for improvement. Also, evaluations should elicit positive comments as well as negative, because knowing what works can help you identify what to keep doing to be effective.

How you evaluate a meeting depends on the purpose(s) of the meeting, the people who participated, the culture of your unit, and the problems that you've noted and want to resolve.

Write and Distribute the Minutes

The minutes of a meeting are essential to following up on the decisions and the assignments. Good minutes docu-

In Like a Lion, Out Like a Lamb

Many meetings are like the month of March: they begin like a lion, with a warm-up and socializing and a review of the agenda by the manager, and end like a lamb, as participants collect their things and file out of the room.

One way to end with energy is to simply stand up at the end, before anybody leaves the room, and close with a few words of appreciation and/or inspiration. You don't need to say much or be eloquent: be sincere and be specific. For example, if there was a major conflict, thank them for working through their differences, or if some of the action plans are ambitious, offer a few words of encouragement.

Another way to provide closure is to thank participants and encourage those with assignments to feel free to come and talk with you about them. Be sincere, enthusiastic, and positive.



ment not only what happened during the meeting but also what is scheduled to happen as a result of the meeting.

Write 'Em Right

Traditionally, the minutes of most meetings are prose narratives that tend to be dull and just go on and on or else are so brief that they don't provide a fair sense of what happened in the meeting.

Minutes can more effectively capture the essence of a meeting and show what the participants have accomplished and will accomplish when they focus on *action*. Action minutes are basically lists, rather than narratives—easy to read and understand.

It should be noted here that good narrative minutes may be more appropriate, even necessary, for some meetings. If the group moves fast, if a meeting covers multiple projects, and/or if discussion is involved, the minutes should capture the main lines of thinking, the discussion threads, the issues raised, and how the group addressed them. As we've emphasized throughout this book, you should always consider your situation, the people, the culture, and the purposes of your meeting. If you decide that a narrative—"intelligent minutes"—would be more appropriate, you should probably ask the note-taker to prepare action minutes as well, as a summary to accompany the narrative.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the minutes should include the following:

1. Date, time, and location of the meeting
2. List of participants
3. List of people invited but absent
4. Participants assigned as facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, and note-taker
5. Agenda
6. For each agenda item:
 - Main discussion points and outcomes (decisions and action items)
 - Names of the participants responsible for the action items and the dates and times for completion
 - Result(s) expected

7. Items for consideration at later meetings
8. Meeting evaluation
9. Reports (attached)

The minutes should be easy to scan: a simple structure helps the facts stand out—decisions and actions are put in bold-face or all caps.

If you've created a form for the minutes, as suggested in Chapter 3, it should be easy for anyone to know what's most important about a meeting at a glance—what was covered, what was decided, what actions were planned, what's expected and by when, and who is responsible for those actions.

Get Out the Word

How soon should the note-taker distribute the minutes? Experts disagree on this question—within three or four days, no later than two days after the meeting, in 24 hours.

The best answer to this question would be *as soon as possible*. You should set a deadline based on the means of distribution and the content and format of the minutes. The shorter the deadline, the more you emphasize the importance of the meeting.

Sure, the note-taker has other work to do, but if you want everybody to recognize that meetings matter, you should expect the note-taker to make the minutes a top priority. That sense of immediacy also sends the message that the assignments outlined in those minutes should also be a priority for the participants to whom they're assigned.

Finally, the faster you get out the minutes, the less time the participants have to rely on their perceptions and memory of the decisions and assignments. They'll soon have it all in black and white.

It's really not a complicated job. The note-keeper can record the essentials listed above in very few words. Since the note-keeper was jotting down the main points during the meeting, often marked as important by the facilitator in his or her summaries and/or by the scribe in his or her running record on display, the minutes are almost done by the close of the meeting.

There's just the task of adding context so the notes make sense to anyone who was not present at the meeting. Then, it's basically a matter of typing up the minutes, printing them out, getting any reports presented at the meeting, and making copies.

Who should receive a copy of those minutes? All of the meeting participants, of course, and any other interested parties. Who are the "interested parties"?

- Anybody who received a copy of the agenda.
- The supervisors of any participants, because the minutes are a record of the work they did. At the very least, the supervisors of any participants who are responsible for assignments from the meeting, because those assignments will take time and effort away from their other work.
- Any manager or other employee who will be involved in the assignments in some way. For example, if an assignment involves getting information from another unit, the head of that unit should know about the decision to seek that information. If an assignment is to survey employees outside your department, a copy of the minutes should go not only to the supervisor of those employees but also to the employees themselves.

Here's another advantage in keeping the minutes succinct and structured: the success of the assignments depends to some extent on making it easy for people to read them!

How should the note-taker distribute the minutes? That depends on your organization, on the culture, on the channels for distributing information, and on the recipients.

The conventional method is by memos. That method has largely been replaced by e-mail. However, for recipients who don't have ready access to a printer or who don't read their e-mails regularly, a memo may still be a good method—at least for anyone who will be involved in any of the assignments from the meeting.



Just in Case

Because the minutes are so important, not only as a record of the meeting but also as documentation of action plans, you may not want to risk inaccurate or incomplete information. It's not necessarily a question of not trusting the note-taker, but an acknowledgment of the importance of the minutes.

You might want to establish a policy of having the note-taker pass the minutes to you to review before he or she distributes them. It should take you just a few minutes to skim the minutes—and it's time well spent. Just think of it as taking a precaution and providing a safety net to avoid problems and save the note-taker from embarrassment or worse.

Another conventional method of publicizing minutes is by posting them on a bulletin board or other permanent, visible location. Technology has provided the next generation of bulletin boards: minutes can also be posted on internal Web pages. This is a good way of reaching people who were not participants but who are on your list of "interested parties." But don't count on the bulletin board or Web pages to get the minutes to those involved in any of the assignments.

The note-taker should be responsible for distributing and otherwise publicizing the minutes. Make sure that you let him or her know who should receive a copy and how.

File the Agenda, the Minutes, and Other Key Documents

This is the easy part, the last thing on the note-taker's list—and perhaps too easy to neglect. Make sure that he or she knows where and how to file the agenda, the minutes, and any other related documents, such as reports and information presented during the meeting.

If the depository for paperwork from meetings is outside your department, it's a good idea to keep a second file. You want to document work done in meetings and as a result of meetings in the same way you would document any other work activities in your department. It's an easy and effective way to show the importance of meetings.

Work the Assignments

At this point, the meeting is officially ended. Now, it's up to participants with assignments to work those assignments.

With some groups, such as project teams and ongoing teams, most of the work happens outside of meetings. Consequently, assignments (such as collecting and analyzing information and preparing reports) may require considerable time and effort. It may be necessary to ask other members of the group to lend a hand, as needed, to complete the assignment by the set date.

The point here is to keep the people who participated in the meeting collaborating with each other. This is a team effort, in a way—and ongoing support can make a big difference in what they accomplish.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Part of that ongoing support is through continued communication—about the meeting, about decisions, about actions, about accomplishments. After all, if you expect your employees and others in the organization to consider meetings to be “real work,” you should communicate about them as you would about other work activities.

Keep all stakeholders informed of progress on the action plan through memos, e-mail, bulletin boards, and so on. Then, when those action plans produce results, get a summary report out to all stakeholders. It should include recognition of the individuals responsible for the actions and express thanks to all the participants of the meetings that developed those action plans.

Improve Your Meetings

Although we've put improvement last in this chapter, it's really the most important single activity in the long run. Do you remember all the problems with meetings that we discussed in Chapter 1? Well, this book is dedicated to the proposition that you can resolve all of those problems.

Unfortunately, we can't prescribe remedies, because only you know the problems. But we can propose some general actions to take.

First, the group should discuss any concerns and suggestions expressed in the evaluations. If doing so takes more time than the group can commit, it may be useful to form a task force to review the evaluations and come up with some ideas for improvement. You may also want to develop a special evaluation to focus on certain key areas and elicit suggestions for improvement from the participants of your next meeting.

What if problems can be attributed to the agendas and other preparation? If that's your responsibility, here are three suggestions. You could distribute copies of a recent agenda to members of the group and ask them to mark it up with comments, anonymously, and put it in your box or slip it under your door. You should probably also read this book again. You may also want to involve other members of the group when you develop the next few agendas, to get feedback before you finalize and distribute them.

If comments are aimed at how members of the group fulfill the roles of facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, and note-taker, you may decide to provide training sessions. You might also work with the people who have those roles, in advance of the meeting, to better prepare them. Then, during the meeting, you could help them by sending signals—giving a “thumbs up” or nodding, shaking your head, making gestures to slow down or pick up the pace, clarify, or ask questions. (Some of these signals are almost universal; the others you should discuss in advance.) Think of it as coaching inexperienced athletes to help them make the most of their abilities.

If there are problems with behavior, meet with the individuals, just as you would if they behaved inappropriately elsewhere in the workplace. By doing this, you improve your meetings in two ways: the individuals in question behave better and your intervention shows that you consider meetings to be as important as other work activities.

When you deal with behavior problems, be careful, as advised in Chapter 3, not to do anything that might be perceived as an attempt to suppress individual freedom of expression or to require “attitude adjustments.” Focus on helping individuals understand that everyone benefits when they show respect for others, when they follow the rules, and when they express their differences in a civil manner.

Chapter 7 will discuss various problems with meetings and suggest ways to deal with them. But first, we will focus on the positive, considering some tools and techniques for more effective discussions, problem solving, and decision making.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 5

- ☐ You've developed a strong agenda and invited the right people to the meeting. The facilitator, the scribe, the time-keeper, and the note-taker have handled their responsibilities. The participants have contributed and collaborated well. But the outcome might be disappointing if it doesn't end right, if all of that preparation and those contributions don't turn into results.
- ☐ The facilitator should summarize the main points, the decisions, actions, and assignments.
- ☐ The facilitator should thank the participants, especially those with special responsibilities for the meeting and those assigned to tasks.
- ☐ The key to effective meetings is evaluating every meeting—and working to improve them.
- ☐ The minutes of a meeting are essential to following up on the decisions and the assignments. The note-taker should finalize and distribute the minutes as quickly as possible.
- ☐ Keep the people who participated in the meeting collaborating after the meeting.



Techniques and Tools

The subject of this chapter actually merits an entire book by itself. In fact, there are dozens of books with techniques and tools for meetings. This chapter can't possibly present all the techniques and tools found in those books and others. But you'll find here some of the basic and best.

The techniques and tools presented in this chapter can be very useful—or a waste of time and effort. That depends on the extent to which the tool or technique you choose to use fits your need as well as on how you use it.

- Know which techniques and tools work for what purposes in what situations.
- Understand how and why the techniques and tools work.
- Use the techniques and tools appropriately.

Discussions tend to follow a basic pattern:

- Open: produce a lot of ideas, questions, information, or options
- Narrow the focus: reduce the list of ideas, questions, factors, or options to a prime few



Think Environment

It's not enough to choose techniques and tools appropriate to your purposes. You also need a suitable environment. Participants should feel comfortable with each other and with the techniques and tools.

Don't assume that group members know about even the more common activities—especially because many techniques and tools have variations. The facilitator should explain the rules at the start.

Even more important, especially for activities that involve creativity or critical thinking, members should feel at ease to make suggestions and express their opinions. The facilitator should be sensitive to any discomfort.

- Decide: apply criteria to those ideas, questions, factors, or options, and select one or prioritize.

Here's a guide to selecting and using some of the most effective techniques and tools for groups:

To identify the Cause(s) of a Problem:

- Repetitive why analysis
- Cause-and-effect analysis

To Generate Ideas:

- Brainstorming
- Mind-mapping
- Displayed thinking

To Organize, Analyze, and Prioritize Ideas:

- Affinity diagram
- PMI
- Six thinking hats
- Effort-impact matrix

To Make Choices Involving Multiple Factors:

- Paired comparison analysis
- Grid analysis
- Multivoting
- Nominal group technique

To Implement the Decision:

- Force-field analysis

Identify the Cause(s) of a Problem

Let's look at the different methods and tools you can use in a meeting to identify problem causes.

Repetitive Why Analysis

The repetitive why is a very simple technique. It consists of asking "Why?" about a problem, then asking "Why?" about the answer, then asking "Why?" about the next answer, then asking "Why?" ... Well, you get the idea.

Here's an example:

Q—"Why was the report late?"

A—"I had trouble using the software."

Q—"Why did you have trouble using the software?"

A—"I couldn't find the manual."

Q—"Why couldn't you find the manual?"

A—"It floats from office to office."

Q—"Why does it float from office to office?"

A—"There's no central place to keep manuals."

Depending on the situation—and the persistence and patience of the team—the repetitive why could continue for a while. In this example, the team could continue, getting into matters of budget or lack of interest or other possible causes of the problem.

A version of this technique is the *five whys*—asking the probing question to five levels, as if there's something magical about five, rather than four or six. The use of this technique in business originated with Taiichi Ohno of Toyota Motor Company. However, any parent would attest that kids seem to use the technique quite naturally.

Cause-and-Effect Analysis

The cause-and-effect analysis is a relative of the repetitive why analysis. Perhaps the biggest difference is that the cause-and-effect analysis builds on a diagram (Figure 6-1) that structures it more than the repetitive why analysis, so it's better for problems with many interrelated causes.

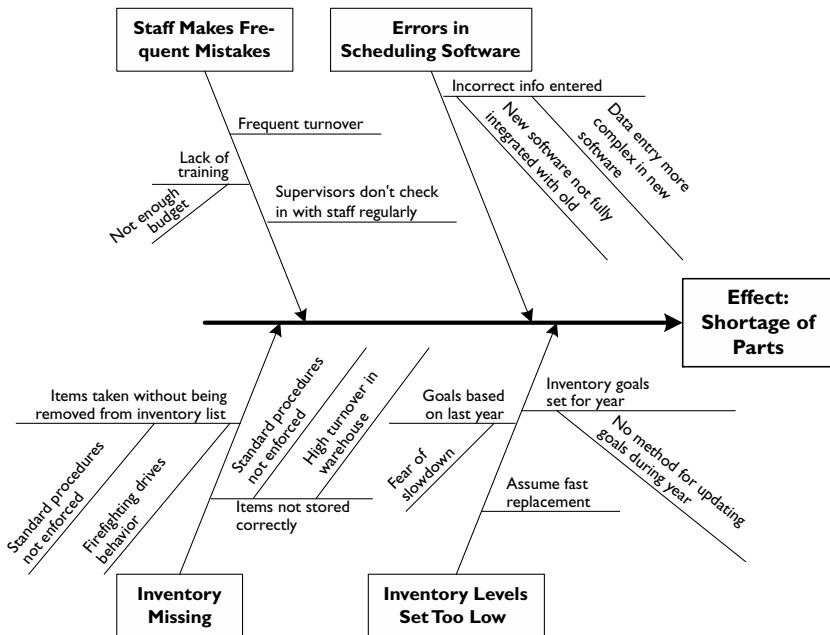


Figure 6-1. Example of a cause-and-effect diagram

You begin by defining the problem, the effect in the cause-and-effect analysis. Then, you consider all of the possible causes of that effect. Group these factors into primary categories, secondary categories, tertiary categories, quaternary categories—until you run out of Latinate adjectives.

For working with a cause-and-effect diagram, it's better to use a blackboard or a whiteboard than a flip chart, so you can erase a factor here to move it there. If you use a flipchart, using self-adhesive notes to put factors on the chart allows similar flexibility.

Write the primary factors at the end of the diagonal lines that branch out from the horizontal line. When brainstorming possible causal factors for the diagram, people often use one of the following organizational schemes to help them think of all the causes:

- Methods, materials, machines, manpower (the “m” word for people) (4 M’s)
- Procedures, policies, equipment, and people
- Place(s), procedure(s), people, policies (4 P’s)
- Surroundings, suppliers, system(s), skills (4 S’s)

You don’t use these factors on the diagram itself because the diagram lists specific factors. For example the cause-and-effect diagram might have “leaking seals” as a cause of some problem, but would not have “equipment” because that is not specific enough.

Write the secondary factors alongside the diagonal lines to which they’re most logically related. From those secondary factors, draw branches for the tertiary factors that relate to them. The practical maximum depth of a cause-and-effect diagram is usually four or five levels.

Once you’ve put all of the possible causes on the chart, you should be ready to verify which factors are actually causing the problem.

Because of the appearance of the diagram, it’s also called a *fishbone diagram*. A third name is the *Ishikawa diagram*, named for Kaoru Ishikawa, a Japanese professor (not of ichthyology, but of engineering) who first used the diagram in 1943.

Generate Ideas

To deal with a problem, you need to come up with possible ideas and solutions. There are a variety of ways to do this. Let’s look at them.

Brainstorming

You certainly recognize this technique—or at least the name. It seems that people are using the term “brainstorming” to refer to any type of discussion. (“Stop by my office and we’ll brainstorm a little.” “We had a few minutes left, so we brainstormed about that suggestion.”) As a result, we all know about brainstorming, in a way, but what we know may not actually be brainstorming.

The term and the technique we owe to Alex F. Osborn, an advertising executive. In the late 1930s or early 1940s, he was challenging his team to think creatively. According to Osborn, "Brainstorm means using the *brain* to *storm* a creative problem ... in commando fashion."

The strategy was to be totally free—uninhibited, unrestricted. As Osborn explained the logic behind being crazy, "It is easier to tone down a wild idea than to think up a new one."

The Basics. The purpose of brainstorming is to encourage creative thinking and generate a large number of ideas. These can be concepts, solutions, or whatever thoughts arise along the direction you set for the brainstorming session—a project, a problem, an opportunity, a program. Brainstorming works, when done properly, because it allows participants to separate two thinking processes—generation and judgment—into two phases.

The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible, because the essence of brainstorming is the belief that the more ideas, the greater the chance of coming up with good ones. The facilitator should encourage creativity, involve all participants, and work to generate energy and excitement.

Brainstorming works best with a about a half-dozen people, but it can work with a dozen or more or with only three. To begin, the facilitator reviews the topic, so that all the participants understand it, and writes it on a board or a flipchart to keep it on display during the session. Then, the participants take a few minutes to think quietly. Next, the facilitator invites ideas.

There are two common methods for eliciting the contributions: round-robin and popcorn. In the first, the participants take turns contributing an idea, going around the group one by one, passing if they have nothing to contribute, until everyone passes for a round. In popcorn, participants call out their ideas in no order, until they have nothing left to contribute. (You can also set a time limit.) Round-robin is a better way for people who are less aggressive and/or more methodical. With the popcorn method, it may be harder for quiet people to participate; it can also become very active—which makes it a greater challenge to

capture all of the contributions.

Depending on the size of the group, the topic, the creativity, the environment, and the method (round-robin or popcorn), the contributions can overwhelm the scribe. Consequently, it's probably wise to have two or three people to record the ideas, with the facilitator orchestrating the recording so the scribes don't miss any ideas or duplicate their efforts.

Here's a variation that is more efficient if the group will later be using an affinity diagram. As each participant makes a contribution, he or she then writes it on a large self-adhesive note sheet and hands it to the scribe, who places it on the flipchart.

Principles. In setting up a brainstorming session, here are some principles that the facilitator should explain to the group:

- Don't react to any ideas—there should be no criticism or other judgments.
- Treat everyone with respect.
- Make all comments to the group—no side discussions.
- One person speaks at a time: don't interrupt.
- Build on ideas (hitchhike or piggyback)—add, shift, combine.
- Don't get caught up in details or differences.
- Feel totally free to offer any ideas.
- Keep focused on a specific topic.

To Time or Not to Time? Some guides to brainstorming recommend setting a time limit. Others do not. What is more important is the pace of the brainstorming. It's critical that the participants understand that they have to think and contribute quickly. A quicker pace will generally encourage more effective and exciting brainstorming. If you decide to set a time limit on the duration of the brainstorm, but then the ideas are still coming as the allotted time dwindles, don't hesitate to extend the time.

Variants. If some or many members of the group tend not to be assertive, you can start with "quiet brainstorming." The facilitator asks the participants to take five minutes to jot down as many



Hitchhike To build on the idea of another participant, to contribute an idea that's only slightly different from another. Also known as *piggyback*.

ideas as possible. Each person then shares his or her ideas, which allows the group to move into spontaneous brainstorming.

The biggest obstacle to brainstorming is reactions—smirks, grimaces, raised eyebrows, sighs, and comments or questions. If you feel a need to more actively discourage reactions, pass around red cards or cards marked “Stop!” for participants to hold up if there are any reactions to contributions.

What Next? After a brainstorming session, take a short break to allow participants to recover energy and change their perspective from creative to analytical. Then they can use a tool like the affinity diagram to organize the ideas into clusters.

Mind-Mapping

Mind-mapping (or mindmapping) is a technique developed in the late 1960s by Tony Buzan, who called it *radiant thinking*. He wanted a method for releasing the full power of the brain, for using the whole brain, not just the left half or the right half.

Mind-mapping helps a group capture complex ideas quickly, easily, and visually, to see the big picture and identify relationships among ideas and processes. As with brainstorming, no judgments are allowed and analysis comes later, after the group has finished mapping. Also, as with brainstorming, the facilitator should encourage participants to experiment and to show respect for each other. There are at least two major differences between mind-mapping and brainstorming: in mind-mapping the contributions are connected, to develop a structure (the map) and contributions and associations are represented graphically, using designs and shapes and colors whenever possible, rather than words.

Here's how it works:

1. Choose a central idea or concept to explore. The key is to choose a starting point that is clear and focused, yet



Questions to Pry, Prod, and Provoke

If the group is slow to get into brainstorming, toss out an old idea (current product, service, process—whatever the topic for brainstorming) and apply SCAMPER, a technique created by Michael Michalko in his book, *Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Business Creativity* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1991). SCAMPER is an acronym for nine techniques for transforming products, services, or processes into something new:

Substitute

- What can be substituted? How?

Combine

- What can be combined? With what? How?

Adapt

- What else is similar?
- What idea could be incorporated?
- Who could be emulated?

Magnify

- What could be made larger, increased, expanded, extended?

Modify

- What could be altered?

Put to other uses

- What else could this be used for? As is? If modified?
- Other purposes? Other markets?

Eliminate or Minimize

- What could be made smaller, decreased, dropped?
- What could be divided into parts?
- What's not necessary?

Rearrange

- What other arrangement, layout, sequence, schedule might work better?

Reverse

- What could be turned around, upside down?
- What would be the opposite?

broad enough to stimulate divergent thinking.

2. The scribe writes this central idea down in the middle of flip chart or white board.
3. Set a time limit. (Buzan maintains that the mind works best in bursts of five to seven minutes.)

4. The facilitator elicits contributions inspired by the central focus.
5. The scribe captures the contributions, drawing lines branching out from the central focus and recording each contribution in one or two words or abbreviations or a sketch of an image or a code—whatever captures the contribution quickly and appropriately. A contribution that relates to another contribution on the chart or board, rather than the central focus, is recorded on a branch from that contribution.
6. If any area of the map becomes too dense, the scribe can start a map on another sheet or board for that particular area.

Those are the basic steps. There are many guidelines, of which these are the most important:

- Print words, using small or capital letters.
- Use bright colors.
- Draw—symbols, codes, shapes, etc.—rather than write whenever possible.
- Connect words and drawings with lines and arrows of varying colors and thicknesses and design.
- Show relationships and order with numbers, if helpful.
- Emphasize words or other representations by bolding and/or underlining.
- Use organized and appropriate spacing.

What the group does with its mind map depends to a great extent on what the map reveals. It's an exploratory tool, rather than analytical, and obviously spatial rather than linear.

Displayed Thinking

This is a technique similar to mind-mapping that allows a group to organize and logically display the results of both creative and analytical thinking. Also known as a form of storyboarding, it can be used to generate, sort, and develop ideas and to organize and/or plan. It creates a logical, visual structure to show interconnections among the ideas and how all the pieces fit together.

As with brainstorming and mind-mapping, participants are encouraged to contribute ideas and build the display. Anything goes, in a spirit of positive and creative thinking. The results are submitted to critical thinking later.

Displayed thinking requires a large surface: a corkboard or a blackboard or an empty wall. (It can take a lot of space.) To write out the ideas, use index cards (3 x 5 or 4 x 6 work best) or self-adhesive note paper. To attach the cards to the surface, use pushpins (on corkboard) or masking tape (on a wall).

Then, follow these steps:

1. At the top of the board, the facilitator puts a topic (e.g., a problem, an opportunity, or a process to be improved).
2. Under the topic, the facilitator and the group put headings (e.g., categories, main directions, general points, primary considerations, or divisions of the organization).
3. The facilitator spreads out on the table markers, cards or paper pads, and pushpins or tape (if necessary).
4. The facilitator instructs the participants to write down their ideas, one per card or note—a statement on the front and, if necessary, an explanation or description on the back. Then, the facilitator explains that they are to post each idea on the board where it belongs logically.
5. After the participants have posted their ideas, the facilitator leads them in grouping like ideas and reorganizing any ideas as the group finds appropriate.
6. Then the participants fill out the board with ideas and details, as necessary.

The result is a large, visual representation of ideas in a logical structure.

Organize, Analyze, and Prioritize Ideas

How do you organize and prioritize ideas? Let's look at some widely-used methods for doing that.

Affinity Diagram

An affinity diagram is a technique for reducing a large number of ideas, opinions, concepts, issues, and so forth—such as after brainstorming—by sorting them into clusters. The group can use a blackboard, a big whiteboard, a wall, or a large table for sorting.

If the contributions are already on self-adhesive note sheets or on cards, the group is ready to begin. If not, the facilitator distributes the flipchart sheets from the brainstorming session to the participants, who divide into as many groups as there are sheets, and then passes out index cards and masking tape or self-adhesive note pads and asks the groups to record the ideas from their sheets onto the cards or notes.

The procedure is simple.

1. The facilitator asks the participants to take their cards or notes to the sorting area and silently put them in logical clusters. They can move around the cards or notes as they want, without talking. After they all arrive at a consensus, they return to their seats. If a card or note seems to fit into more than one cluster, a participant can make a duplicate card or note so the contribution can be put into both clusters.
2. The facilitator takes one cluster of cards or notes at a time. He or she reads the contributions in that cluster and asks the group to come up with a heading or title or label (usually three to five words) that best describes or encompasses the contributions in that cluster. The group may agree at this point to combine similar clusters or to split large clusters.
3. The group then discusses the clusters and how they interrelate.

PMI

PMI (“Plus/Minus/Interesting”) is a simple but important tool for making decisions. It’s used to weigh the pros and cons of alternatives, particularly actions.

The scribe draws on the flipchart or whiteboard three col-

umns, headed “Plus,” “Minus,” and “Interesting.” Across the top, he or she writes the alternative or action under consideration.

Then the facilitator asks the group to come up with points about the alternative or potential results of the action. If a point is good or a result is positive, the scribe records it in the Plus column. If a point is bad or a result is negative, the scribe records it in the Minus column. Points or results that fit into neither the scribe puts into the Interesting (Implications) column.

If the issue under consideration is an *action*, it may be very obvious by the end of the discussion whether or not the action makes sense: either the Plus column or the Minus column dominates. Of course, it’s not a matter of quantity of entries, but quality: one major factor can outweigh a long list of minor factors. If the decision is not obvious from the discussion, the group should consider each of the items in the Plus and Minus columns and assign a numerical score (e.g., +2, -4, +3) for its importance, by consensus. The group should consider the items in the “Interesting” column, which may tilt the balance one way or the other. Only as a last resort, if the discussion does not lead to a decision, comparing the totals for Plus and Minus can help the group reach a decision.

If the issue under consideration is an *alternative*, the group should do a PMI for both or all of the alternatives, following the procedure described above.

Six Thinking Hats

Six thinking hats is a technique for considering an issue (a decision, a problem, an opportunity) from all important perspectives. It forces participants to move beyond their usual thinking styles and helps them form a more complete picture of the situation.

This tool was created by Edward de Bono, who presents it in full detail in his book, *Six Thinking Hats*. He developed this technique as a process for using lateral thinking in problem solving, particularly in groups.

The technique is simple in concept. When the group is considering an issue, the members all wear one hat at a time, figu-



Lateral thinking A set of systematic techniques for using multiple perspectives and approaches for exploring an issue. Edward de Bono divides thinking into two styles—*vertical thinking*, the traditional method that uses the processes of logic, and *lateral thinking*, which involves breaking from routine thinking to consider issues from other angles.

atively. (Of course, if your budget can cover six hats for each participant, they can wear the thinking hats literally and dress for success.) The facilitator indicates which hat to wear and when to switch hats. Some approaches will be more important than others, depending on

whether the issue is a decision, a problem, an opportunity, or whatever else.

So, what are these hats and what perspectives do they represent?

White Hat: Participants focus on the information available and see what they can learn from it. They also look for gaps in their knowledge and they either try to fill them or take them into account. “I think we need to do some white hat thinking: what facts are we lacking to make this decision?”

Red Hat: Participants consider the issue using their emotions, intuition, and gut reactions. They also try to feel how other people will react emotionally to the issue, especially those who don’t fully know the reasoning of the group. The red hat allows participants to express reactions without any need to justify them. “If I can put on my red hat at this point, I think this proposal would be a mistake.”

Black Hat: Participants identify and examine all of the potential negatives of the issue. They should be critical, cautious, and defensive. This perspective is important—and often neglected because people usually want to be positive and optimistic. But if you’re aware of the potential negatives of an issue, you can work to reduce or eliminate them and/or to plan appropriately. “We need to wear our black hats for a while, because we’re get-

ting caught up in our enthusiasm over this idea.”

Yellow Hat: Participants think positively. They take an optimistic perspective to consider all of the good points involved in an issue. This perspective is especially important when dealing with a problem or considering a decision that’s an uneasy compromise or necessitated by circumstances. “It seems that we’re going to need to make this change whether we like it or not, so maybe we should put on the yellow hats for a moment and find the silver lining in this cloud.”

Green Hat: Participants allow their creativity to play freely. The emphasis is on imagination—possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas; critical analysis is suspended. “OK, now, we’ve been going around in circles with this problem. It’s time to try our green hats.”

Blue Hat: Participants are thinking about the process, not the issue. This is the hat that decides which hat might be best to wear next. “I’m putting on my blue hat and deciding that we should do some more red hat thinking here.”

So, in summary, the six thinking hats technique consists of five focused perspectives or approaches and a hat that serves as the fashion sense, to decide which hat would be most appropriate at any given point.

Develop Differences

Perhaps the most neglected yet important aspect of promoting better interaction for discussing, generating ideas, solving problems, and making decisions is to invite to the meeting individuals with diverse perspectives, a range of experiences, and different thinking styles.

To get new perspectives on your employees, read any article or book on thinking or collaborating styles—such as *Team Players and Teamwork: The New Competitive Business Strategy* by Glenn M. Parker (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996)—and then try to analyze each of your people in terms of those styles. That new perspective could enable you to ensure diversity of thinking in your meetings.



Effort-Impact Matrix

This tool, also known as the *effort-impact grid*, is used in effort/impact analysis. This type of analysis is appropriate when the top criteria for decisions are the effort (time, money, difficulty) needed to implement them and the impact (effectiveness) expected from them, and the number of items to consider is small. The effort-impact matrix can also be used to choose which project among many to undertake first.

The group plots each choice along gradients of effort and impact, such that the choices fall somewhere within one of four quadrants (Figure 6-2). The group should decide in advance how it will prioritize the quadrants, according to the situation.

In general, low-effort, high-impact choices are best and high-effort, low-impact choices would come last. But then, which quadrant rates higher: high-effort, high-impact or low-effort, low-impact? The group may decide to act on choices that are low-effort and low-impact as resources allow and to study choices that are high-effort and high-impact. However, a group that wants to focus on a single choice that will make the biggest difference would want the choice with the greatest impact, regardless of the effort involved.

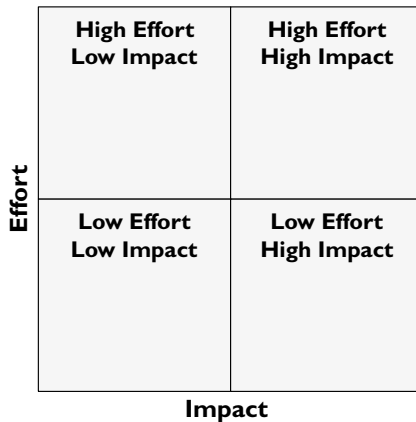


Figure 6-2. Effort-impact matrix

If the members reach agreement on priorities before analyzing each of the choices, the group can avoid the time and energy that might be spent after the choices are plotted in the matrix, as some members advocate for specific pet projects.

Make Choices Involving Multiple Factors

Making a group decision that everyone accepts and works to implement can be tricky, but there are some useful methods you can use to do this. Let's look at some of these.

Paired Comparison Analysis

Paired comparison analysis, also known as comparative valuation, is used to work out the importance of a number of options relative to each other, to set priorities. It makes it easier for the group to decide, for example, which problem to solve or which solution to implement. The tool—a priority grid—provides a structure for comparing each option against each of the others.

Here's how to use paired comparison analysis:

1. The scribe lists all of the options and gives each a simple label (one or two words or a number or letter).
2. The scribe draws up a priority grid with enough rows and columns to allow for the options.
3. The scribe enters each option as both a row header and a column header. (See Figure 6-3.)

	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
Option A	—			
Option B		—		
Option C			—	
Option D				—

Figure 6-3. Priority grid for paired comparison analysis

4. The facilitator leads the group in comparing each option with each other option, one by one. The group decides which of the two options is more important and the scribe marks the cell where the row and column intersect with the label assigned to that option. The group can also rate the difference in importance by assigning a score, such as 1 (little difference) to 3 (big difference); the scribe puts the score in the cell.

(Of course, cells remain empty where the group would be comparing an option with itself—normally along the diagonal running from top left to bottom right of the grid. Also, the group will not be duplicating any comparisons—normally all cells below the diagonal. The scribe can block out all the superfluous cells.)

5. The facilitator adds up the cells marked for each option and, if there are scores, the scores for each option. Often this is followed by discussion of the choices as a check to make sure that the option with the highest total score really makes sense as the best choice.

Grid Analysis

Grid analysis is effective for making a decision, especially when there are a number of alternatives and many factors to consider.

Here are the steps for using a grid (also known as a *decision table*):

1. The group lists the options.
2. The group lists the factors that are important for making the decision.
3. The scribe makes a grid, listing the options as rows and the factors as columns.
4. For each factor, the group assigns a weight to show its importance. (If the group is unable to agree on weights, it can use paired comparison analysis to determine relative importance.) The scribe marks the weight on the grid beneath the factor heading.

5. The group rates each option in terms of each factor, from 0 (poor) to 3 (very good). The scribe puts the rating in the cell.
6. After the group has rated all of the options in terms of each of the factors, the scribe multiplies each rating by the weight of the factor, to arrive at a score in each cell of the grid.
7. The scribe adds up the scores for each option. The option with the highest score is the best.

Figure 6-4 shows an example of a completed grid.

		Factors and Weights					
Options		Time 3	Cost 8	Other Resources 6	Negative Effects on Division 3	Negative Effects on Customers 8	Total Scores
	Launch new product	1=3	1=8	1=6	2=6	3=24	47
	Expand current product market	2=6	1=8	2=12	1=3	3=24	53
	Raise price of current product	3=9	3=24	3=18	0=0	1=8	59

Figure 6-4. Grid analysis

Again, this is usually followed by some discussion to make sure the option with the highest point score makes sense as the first choice. In general, grids are useful structures to ensure systematic discussion, but it's not wise to let the math alone make the decision.

Multivoting

Multivoting is effective when the group needs to prioritize a lot of ideas.

1. The scribe lists and numbers the ideas to be considered on a flip chart, a blackboard, a whiteboard, or other display area.

2. The facilitator determines the number of votes to allow the participants. It's generally a third of the number of choices. So, for example, if there are 25 choices, allow nine votes.
3. Ask the participants to each write down their selections silently.
4. The participants then register their votes. There are several ways of doing this. The facilitator may go down the list and ask for a show of hands (votes) for each choice. The facilitator may distribute sticky dots or colored markers to all participants and ask them to place one dot or a mark (a vote) next to each of their choices.
5. The facilitator counts the votes for each choice and the scribe records the tallies. The top choices are then prioritized in the order of the number of votes received. It may be necessary to have a second round of voting; if so, the

group can drop from contention ideas receiving the fewest votes.



Smart Managing

Stock Your Tool Box

We're all familiar with the saying, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." If you're using only one tool or technique, the odds are pretty good you're using it wrong sometimes. Unfortunately, sometimes a technique or a tool works well enough that managers don't explore other options and thus limit the possibilities for their groups.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there are many techniques and tools for meetings, presented in more complete detail in other books. With a little experience, you'll find which of the ones presented in this

chapter and which you find elsewhere work best for your purposes and the culture and spirit of your group.

Nominal Group Technique

This technique is used to obtain many contributions on an issue in a structured brainstorming format and then to prioritize the ideas, factors, or solutions. It's a good way to get many ideas from a group, especially for identifying causes and solving problems and for planning.

Nominal group technique was developed to eliminate the social and psychological dynamics of group behavior that tend to inhibit individual creativity and participation. The process is a structured variation of conventional group discussion methods, with some significant advantages:

- It allows every member of the group an equal opportunity to contribute.
- It prevents individuals from dominating the discussion.
- It encourages more passive members to participate in the discussion.
- It allows the group to reach agreement faster.
- It uses different processes for different phases of decision-making.

Here's how nominal group technique works:

1. The facilitator states the problem, question, or task and the scribe writes it on the flipchart, blackboard, or whiteboard.
2. Each member of the group spends several minutes silently thinking about the issue and writing down on a sheet of paper as many ideas as possible.
3. The facilitator asks each participant, in turn, to share one idea from his or her list. No discussion is allowed, although members may ask the contributor to clarify. The scribe records the ideas on the flip chart or board.
4. This process continues until all ideas have been contributed and recorded. Participants may pass if they run out of ideas. They may also build upon ideas suggested.
5. The facilitator reads each idea listed and asks for any questions, clarifications, or interpretations. The facilitator should not allow comments to turn into arguments. The group can combine similar ideas or drop repetitive ideas, if all participants agree. The scribe should number (consecutively) each idea that the group discusses and keeps. (Up to this point, the method has been a highly structured version of brainstorming.)

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6. The facilitator gives each participant the same number of blank index cards (between three and seven, usually five). We'll assume five here, for the sake of simplicity; the pattern would be expanded for six or seven and reduced for three or four. Then the group prioritizes the ideas in the last two groups.
7. Each participant writes down, one per card, the five ideas on the list that he or she feels are the most important, with the number. Then he or she rates each idea selected, in the following way:
 - Choose the most important and write a 5 in a circle in the lower right corner of the card.
 - Choose the least important and write a 1 in a circle in the lower right corner of the card.
 - Choose the most important of the remaining three cards and write a 4 in a circle in the lower right corner of the card.
 - Choose the least important of the remaining two cards and write a 2 in a circle in the lower right corner of the card.
 - On the remaining card write a 3 in a circle in the lower right corner of the card.
8. The facilitator collects all of the cards and shuffles them. He or she then reads from each card the idea and the points. On the flip chart, the scribe marks the points next to the idea.
9. After reading all of the cards, the facilitator adds up the points for each idea and the scribe records the total.

Implementing the Decision

Once the group has made a decision, it's useful to explore what's involved in its implementation, including potential problems. Force field analysis is a method for doing that.

Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis is a technique for considering what a group needs to do to successfully implement a decision. Once a deci-

sion has been made, a force field analysis can help the group identify actions to take to improve the chances of success.

The analysis shows the forces that the group could or should work to strengthen and the forces that the group could or should try to remove or weaken.

The technique of force field analysis was developed by Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in the social sciences, who assumed that in any situation there are forces that influence any change that may occur. He labeled them “driving forces” and “restraining forces.”

To carry out a force field analysis:

- The scribe draws a T chart and labels one side “driving forces” or “pros” and the other side “restraining forces” or “cons.”
- The facilitator asks the group to identify forces either driving or restraining the decision. As suggestions come forth, the group assigns to each force a score from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong). The scribe records the force and its score in the appropriate column.
- As the group lists restraining forces, it may also think of driving forces that counterbalance them. On the other hand, sometimes listing a driving force can cause the group to come up with one or more restraining forces.

The point is to identify as many forces as possible on each side, to have the most complete picture of the context of the decision under consideration. Then the group can discuss the restraining forces and propose ways to remove or weaken them and/or discuss the driving forces to find ways of maximizing them.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 6

- ☐ There are many techniques and tools for discussions, generating ideas, solving problems, and making decisions. It's essential to know which techniques and tools work for what purposes and in what situations, in order to under-

stand how and why the techniques and tools succeed, and then to use the techniques and tools appropriately.

- ❑ Whether you want the group to make a decision, solve a problem, or come up with ideas, you must break the process down into steps in order to choose and use any technique or tool properly.
- ❑ To identify the cause(s) of a problem, repetitive why analysis or a cause-and-effect diagram (fishbone analysis) is effective.
- ❑ To generate ideas, many people use brainstorming (in some form), but mind-mapping and displayed thinking can also help. Following that, an affinity diagram is a good way to organize ideas, to discover key themes and issues.
- ❑ To analyze alternatives, there's the simplicity of PMI and the fun focus of the six thinking hats.
- ❑ To make choices involving multiple factors, the effort-impact matrix is good for possible actions, while paired comparison analysis and grid analysis allow a group to make a choice when there are many factors to consider.
- ❑ To prioritize a list of items or choose among issues under consideration, two standard approaches are the nominal group technique and multivoting.
- ❑ To understand what actions are needed to successfully implement a choice, use force field analysis.



Uh-Oh ... Now What? Problems and Possibilities

The possibility of problems always exists when you bring people together in any situation, including meetings. So in this chapter we'll discuss some of the more common and/or serious problems that occur in meetings that were first listed in Chapter 1. Keep in mind, however, that no book can offer solutions for every situation—nor can any solution work in all instances of a situation.

We hope that you'll never need this chapter—but we know that you will, unfortunately. We recommend that you pass along this book to each person that you select to serve as facilitator, when you give him or her the “good news,” and suggest reading this chapter.

An Ounce of Prevention

Dealing with problems during a meeting is most difficult—not necessarily because of the nature or severity of the problems, but because problems during a meeting are generally not your

responsibility, but the responsibility of the facilitator and the other members of the group.

But you can take some preventive measures to reduce the chances of major problems. Chapter 2 recommended talking with participants one on one in advance of the meeting to reduce the possibility of problems resulting from personality conflicts.

If you suspect problems are likely or even possible, you can suggest in advance that the facilitator begin the meeting by setting a constructive tone. He or she can mention that there are items on the agenda that could bring out differences of opinion and reinforce that these differences are useful and often lead to better discussions and decisions—as long as the focus is on the issues, not the people. The facilitator should express trust that the participants will keep in mind the purposes of the meeting and act responsibly in the best interests of the group.

Then, later in the meeting, if unproductive conflicts break out, the facilitator can remind the clashing participants and others of the importance of constructive disagreement.

Better Than Any Suggestions

For many situations that may arise during a meeting, the first and generally best remedy are the ground rules your group has set for its meetings. (Those ground rules should also help prevent problems or at least limit their severity.)

They're probably better than any suggestions this chapter could offer, for two reasons:

- Your group developed them, by consensus.
- They're appropriate to your environment and culture.

If no ground rules govern the situation, then the suggestions offered in this chapter might help. If your situation is not covered here, then maybe a suggestion for a similar circumstance might apply.

If you find that you and your facilitators are improvising remedies more than occasionally, it might be time to review the rules and revise them to better fit your needs.

Getting Started

Let's look at some of the problems that might occur just as meetings are getting started.

Late Arrivals and No-Shows

A person arrives late. The facilitator should ignore the arrival and simply continue. This reaction minimizes the effects of the interruption and doesn't shift the attention from the agenda to the individual. You could follow up by talking with the person after the meeting, if you're curious about his or her reason(s) for arriving late.

Late arrivals become common. If it's the same person or several people arriving late, you should meet with them one on one and discuss the importance of starting meetings as scheduled. Find out why they are arriving late and work to address the causes.

If arriving late is a widespread problem, you might consider whether it would help to establish a ground rule about arriving late. However, since some delays are inevitable, you would be placing the facilitator or yourself in the uncomfortable position of deciding whether a reason is acceptable or not—which may make members of the group feel as if they're back in school—not a good thing.

It seems wiser to give participants more reason to arrive on time. How are you beginning meetings? Do you get to essential agenda items immediately or do you spend time on matters that are less important? If participants feel that the first few min-

Don't Rush to Rule



Be wary about feeling that for every problem there should be a ground rule. Keep these rules as simple as possible. The more rules you have, the easier it is for participants to neglect the principles behind them—such as respect, collaboration, and efficiency.

Don't Punish with Work



Avoid assigning tasks as punishments. That sends the message that contributing to the group effort is something bad, rather than a normal responsibility.

utes don't mean much, you're actually encouraging them to arrive late.

You could also consider scheduling meetings for "first thing," so participants are less likely to be delayed, at least not by work matters. But if the beginning of meetings is not interesting to participants, this approach is unlikely to work.

People invited to a meeting don't show up. You should talk one to one with anybody who misses a meeting. There may be a valid explanation—or it may reveal a problem with the meetings. If it's a chronic problem with one or several individuals, you should assign some responsibility, to give the individuals a more compelling reason to attend the meetings. You might make them informants, responsible for providing information about an agenda item.

Group Interaction

Problems that occur in the interaction between people at the meeting are common and can be quite vexing and an important reason people don't like meetings. Here's how to anticipate and deal with some of the problems you'll likely encounter.

Confusion

Participants seem to be confused. The facilitator should ask them why they're confused.

If it's because they don't understand the purpose of the meeting and/or the agenda, the facilitator should review the purpose and the agenda.

If it's because they haven't read the agenda in advance and are not prepared, take note and make a point of providing more details in your agendas and even indicating how you expect participants to prepare for the meetings.

Weak Participation

Participants are apparently thinking about other things or even dozing off. This is a tough situation, because there could be various reasons. Are they disinterested in the agenda? Do they

feel that the meeting isn't challenging them? Are they just bored with the pace and/or the tone?

If they're disinterested, it may be because they feel there's little or no need for them to be attending the meeting or at least all of it. Find out. If so and they're right, then think more carefully about the people you're including in meetings.

If they're not interested because the meeting isn't addressing any issues that matter to them, at the end of the meeting the facilitator should encourage them to suggest items for the agendas of upcoming meetings.

If the meeting isn't challenging them, there's a remedy for the moment and a remedy for later. The facilitator can involve them with questions, calling on them by name. If this problem develops over more than one meeting, you can try another tactic: assign the individuals responsibility for providing information or even leading the discussion of an agenda item. This approach has two major benefits:

- The individuals will not be inattentive for the entire meeting, because they will be in the spotlight for at least a little while.
- The individuals will better appreciate the greater difficulty of conducting a meeting when members of the group don't get involved.

If they're bored, find out why. Meetings should inspire participants with a sense of purpose, with enthusiasm about achieving goals. The problem could be, in part, with the agenda—the items and/or the format. How did the meeting begin? There should be positive energy from the start: participants should feel that they are gathered to collaborate and accomplish. How is the facilitator conducting the meeting? As mentioned in Chapter 4, the facilitator should set and maintain an appropriate pace. If you suspect that the problem may be, to some extent, with the facilitator, you may want to prepare the facilitator a little better. You might also think more carefully about the time allocations on the agenda.



Lend a Hand

If a facilitator is not maintaining a suitable pace and participants are showing signs of boredom or impatience, you might want to help him or her by sending a subtle signal to pick up the pace.

If the facilitator is moving too quickly, so participants are having trouble contributing or maybe even following, a signal should make him or her aware of the problem.

If pacing is a consistent problem and involves more than one or two facilitators, the problem could be in the agenda. It may be that you need to allocate time more appropriately.

There's another tactic when participants aren't paying attention or getting involved, but it's risky. Bring "toys" to the meeting. Some people listen better when they have something like play dough to work with during the meeting. However, if the lack of attention and involvement is because the meeting doesn't seem important to those members of the group, then you need to address the purpose of the meeting.

Some participants remain silent. This problem may be similar to the preceding problem of participants being inattentive and uninvolved, depending on the cause(s). That's a judgment call for the facilitator and for you. Is the meeting uninteresting? Is it unchallenging? Is it boring? If it seems that the silence is due to any of these factors, the facilitator should try the recommendations above.

However, participants may remain silent because they haven't prepared sufficiently for the meeting. If the facilitator suspects that this is the reason, he or she should ask them questions that don't require any preparation, just thinking, such as to comment on contributions by others. In other words, don't punish them or exclude them, but find ways for them to contribute.

Maybe, on the other hand, the silence is due to personality and/or group dynamics: some people are usually quiet around others, while some are quiet only in certain situations. An instinctive reaction for the facilitator might be to call on a quiet person to contribute. That tactic is often not very effective—and it can cause other quiet members of the group to resent the

facilitator. A more effective tactic might be to circle the group for comments, allowing individuals to pass when it's their turn. It's about opportunities, not obligations.

This tactic can be particularly effective if the facilitator can select individuals because of their special expertise, experience, or interests; e.g., “Adriana, I believe that

you’ve worked with this issue in the past. Would you like to share anything you’ve learned from that?”

Finally, if there’s enough time and space, the facilitator could also break the group into twos and threes to discuss the issue and report back to the group.

The group is generally not participating much. The facilitator could either try to guess at the reason(s) for the lack of involvement—or just ask! There may be an issue that the group should address before continuing. It could take a change in the agenda or a short break.

But what if there are no specific reasons or, at least, no reasons that the group can address? Then, the facilitator could break the group into twos and threes and give them some challenging questions, to provoke them to think, or try one of the techniques described in Chapter 6.

You should also analyze the situation. Maybe the time is wrong, such as immediately after lunch, first thing Monday morning, or late on a Friday afternoon. If you’re providing refreshments, maybe that’s part of the problem: rich foods can undermine participation, so fruits and vegetables might improve participation for future meetings. Again, rather than just guess, you might try asking; when the members of the group do their

Responsibility Through Advocacy

To encourage participation at meetings, a colleague recommended this approach, borrowed from Native American tribes. When people would gather to discuss and make decisions, each person would be assigned the responsibility of representing a constituency, including entities such as nature. The person would be expected to participate from the perspective of his or her assigned constituency and to serve as advocate.



evaluation at the end of the meeting, add a question or two about why there's so little participation and what could be done to increase it.

Too Much Talk, Not Enough Action

Too many people are talking at once. The facilitator should thank them for their enthusiasm, but then remind them that good contributions can be lost if more than one person is talking at any one time and that the confusion can keep some people out of the discussion.



Keep on the Ball

If participants talk over each other, here's a gimmick that should help maintain order. Provide the facilitator with a foam ball. When a discussion opens, the facilitator tosses the ball to the first member of the group who signals that he or she wants to contribute. Then, that participant tosses the ball to the next member who signals. The facilitator may occasionally have to direct a toss, but at least everybody will know at any moment which person has the floor.

If appropriate, the facilitator can direct traffic, by pointing to individuals, one at a time, to give them the floor. The facilitator can also suggest going around the group for comments, to establish a "natural" sequence of contributions. There's no reason to go formal—"The chair recognizes ..."—but just to direct the vehicles of thought a little to avoid traffic jams.

Someone keeps bringing up the same point. Often, what motivates people to repeat a point is that they think others don't understand them. The facilitator should summarize the person's statement to make sure that all understand.

If the person continues to repeat the point, the facilitator can indicate the flipchart or other display where the scribe has already recorded that idea: "We've already got that point here. Are you offering any additional support for it or any new perspectives?" He or she then invites others to contribute, to assume responsibility for the meeting. This tactic encourages contributions from the other members and emphasizes that all members of the group

are responsible for the meeting—and conveys the message that nobody should monopolize the discussion.

The group is stuck on the same point, repeating comments, not coming up with anything new. This situation is just like the preceding, except in quantity—unless there's not a single member to call on to break the group out of the rut. In that case, to dislodge participants from their positions, the facilitator should change the discussion activity. It might help, for example, to have the scribe list the positions and then go into the technique of the six thinking hats, described in Chapter 6—especially the black hat (to identify potential negatives), the red hat (to react emotionally), and the white hat (to look for gaps in knowledge).

A participant continues on an issue, but the others are not contributing. Before reacting to this situation, the facilitator should try to figure out why only one person is participating in the discussion.

- Is he or she the resident expert on the issue under discussion?
- Is he or she popular, charismatic, a natural leader to whom others naturally defer?
- Is he or she the only member of the group interested in the issue?
- Is he or she boring or annoying the others?

Diagnosis: the soloist is the resident expert on the issue under discussion. Maybe the group is ready to make a decision, since it seems that the members have reached consensus. The facilitator should ask them if it's time to decide.

Diagnosis: the soloist is popular, charismatic, a natural leader. It can be difficult to work around an aura, but here's an idea that might work. The facilitator can distribute index cards, one to a person, and leave extras in the middle of the table, just in case. Then, he or she asks the members of the group to each write down three concerns that somebody outside this group,

who would be affected by this decision, might have. This approach of shifting the context of the discussion to the perspectives of outsiders may shake the influence of the thought leader. Then the facilitator collects and reads the cards and the scribe records the concerns. This technique allows members of the group to express their own concerns anonymously, and you may find that others share these concerns.

Diagnosis: the soloist is the only member of the group interested in the issue. If the facilitator suspects that disinterest is the restraining force, he or she should ask the group if they want to move to make a decision.

Diagnosis: the soloist is boring or annoying the others. The facilitator can use the approach suggested above when some participants remain silent: "Now we know how Terry feels. Who else is willing to share some thoughts?"

Conversations on the Side

Participants are talking among themselves. Not all side conversations are bad. Sometimes they can serve the same purpose as breaking up the group into twos and threes: they allow members of the group to express themselves less publicly. If there are several side conversations going, the facilitator could suggest that the other members form clusters, too. Then he or she should put a question or two on display for the clusters to discuss. If the facilitator asks each cluster to sum up its discussion and conclusions on a sheet of paper or index card, it should help focus chatters on the agenda item.

OK, that's how side conversations can be good. In general, however, they're distracting and annoying. There are some things that the facilitator can do to discourage chats:

- If seated, stand.
- Try to create eye contact with the chatters.
- Walk around the room, slowly, and then stand near the chatters, for as long as it takes.
- Talk louder.

- Tap on the table to call for order.
- Say that you are distracted by multiple conversations and ask to limit talking to the discussion.
- Call on the chatters by name to invite them to contribute.

It Takes All Kinds

It's important for a manager or a facilitator to keep in mind that a meeting is work and that people work in various ways. The facilitator should exercise judgment and discretion in governing this micro society. The sidebar, "The Psychological Dynamics of Teamwork," presents one way to better understand the members of your group.



The Psychological Dynamics of Teamwork

Problems with participation may be a factor of personality types. To facilitate interactions more effectively and efficiently, the facilitator should understand the basics of *team player styles*.

Glenn M. Parker explored this aspect of personality in his book, *Team Players and Teamwork: The New Competitive Business Strategy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996). His research revealed that there are four team player styles that are essential to the success of any team. We all have characteristics of each style, to a greater or lesser extent, but each of us has a dominant style.

Contributor: Provides information and focuses the group on the task at hand.

Positive characteristics: dependable, responsible, organized, efficient, logical, clear, relevant, pragmatic, systematic

Negative characteristics: shortsighted, compulsive, hung up on facts, uncreative, perfectionist

Collaborator: Provides a sense of direction, gets the group to set goals, and emphasizes overall purpose.

Positive characteristics: cooperative, flexible, confident, focused on the future, conceptual, accommodating, generous, open, visionary, imaginative

Negative characteristics: overly committed, overly involved, too global, overly ambitious, insensitive

Communicator: Attends to "people issues" and helps the group address matters of process.

Positive characteristics: supportive, encouraging, relaxed, informal, spontaneous, helpful, friendly, patient, considerate, tactful

Negative characteristics: aimless, foolish, placating, impractical, manipulative

Challenger: Encourages the group to question its methods and goals, asks tough questions, and pushes the team to take reasonable risks.

Positive characteristics: candid, questioning, outspoken, straightforward, ethical, honest, truthful, principled, adventurous, brave

Negative characteristics: rigid, arrogant, self-righteous, contentious, quibbling

Focus

Not focusing appropriately on the issues can be another reason people tend to avoid meetings. Let's look at some of the problems in this area and what to do about them.

Too Little Focus

A participant is talking around the issue, not making his or her point. The facilitator should not single out any particular participant: that reaction could embarrass the person in

question and have a chilling effect on participation by others in the group.

The facilitator should wait until he or she is opening the next discussion, and then request that participants try to communicate concisely. He or she should remind them of the time allotted to the discussion and suggest that each contribution be limited to about two minutes.

That doesn't mean that the timekeeper will necessarily need to clock the contributions, but the facil-



Styles and Strengths

A facilitator who can identify the characteristics of team player styles can build on the positive.

To help the group get out of problem situations, the facilitator can encourage participants whose styles are most beneficial. Here are some general situations and the style that might be most appropriate:

- If the group is getting caught up in digressions—Collaborators
- If a discussion seems to be too soft, not probing and questioning—Challengers
- If emotions are rising and straining collaboration—Communicators
- If the discussion is becoming abstract—Contributors

erator should signal—tactfully—any participant who obviously exceeds the limit.

A participant starts getting into another, unrelated issue. The easiest way for the facilitator to handle the situation is simply to say, “We’re getting away from the agenda now. Maybe this issue should be set aside for another meeting.” Then the group can decide later whether or not to put the issue on an agenda in the future.

The facilitator could also turn the digression over to the group, by asking for reactions: “Who would like to relate these comments to our discussion?” If others can find connections, then the comments may not be really a digression. If not, then at least the digressive party has had a chance to shift the discussion, although not gaining support from the rest of the group.

If the discussion doesn’t shift, the facilitator should return to the agenda item. If the digression has taken the group away from the agenda for a while, he or she should summarize the discussion or at least the most recent contributions in order to get the group back on track.

If the facilitator can’t remember where the discussion was going before it veered off the track, he or she should ask members of the group to reconstruct the discussion. This approach can be a good way to encourage participation and recover momentum.

Participants are all going off on a tangent together. The facilitator should gesture toward the agenda (if displayed) or otherwise remind the group of the agenda item under consideration. He or she could then ask if there would be enough interest in the tangent to put it on the agenda for another meeting. If a show of hands indicates sufficient interest, consider scheduling it for an upcoming meeting. If you’re unsure that it merits any consideration, you can e-mail participants and solicit their thoughts on the topic. It may be that you’re missing something—or it may be that a lack of response will show that the tangent was interesting only at the moment and not worth any meeting time.

Participants are all going off in different directions at the same time. Here again, the facilitator should point to the agenda (if displayed) or otherwise remind the group of the agenda item under consideration. He or she should then invite the participants to submit their tangents to you for possible inclusion in a future meeting.

Then the facilitator should direct the discussion back on track, by reminding the group about the agenda item and the purpose: "We've strayed off the track a little from discussing ____ and trying to reach a decision about ____." Then he or she should turn to the notes kept on display by the scribe and review the last few relevant points.

Another possibility is for the facilitator to explore the reasons for the tangents: "It's been difficult for us to discuss this issue. Why?"

Too Much Focus

The group seems too focused on reaching a decision. It might not seem like it's really a problem for a group to be too focused on pursuing decisions. However, whether the impetus is general impatience, or a dominant participant, or a feeling of pressure to "just do something," this focus on making a decision usually causes tunnel vision.

If the facilitator senses that the group is feeling "action attraction," he or she should emphasize the process, that the group should discuss issues thoroughly before moving into a decision.

There are other suggestions below, for groupthink and for dealing with dominant personalities.

Group Dynamics and Individual Personalities

Group dynamics, the term itself conjures up problems for some people. Let's examine some group dynamics issues that get in the way of effective meetings.

Groupthink

As explained in Chapter 4, *groupthink* is the tendency of a group of people to seek unanimous agreement in spite of facts that would contradict such agreement. To help keep discussions healthy and worthwhile, here are some things you can do in advance:

- Assign one or more members to play the role of critical evaluator or devil's advocate.
- Invite outside experts to provide information and perspectives.
- Require the development of a certain number of options before moving toward a decision.
- Instruct the group to first develop a list of evaluation criteria before coming up with any ideas—and then ensure that the members use those criteria.

During a meeting, the facilitator can take any of the following actions:

- Elicit contributions from every member of the group.
- Encourage members to raise objections and concerns.
- Encourage the group to consider all contributions carefully.
- Praise members who show the courage to think independently.
- Challenge comments: “Is that a fact or an opinion?” or “Do we have any information to support the point that you’re making?”
- Divide the group into smaller groups to discuss, then compare the results.

Dominant Participants

What types of participants might dominate a meeting?

- People who are experts—or are accepted as such by others in the group.
- People who are respected, admired, and followed by others in the group.

- People who are eloquent, who express their perspectives so well that others refrain from contributing.
- People who have strong personalities.

A participant is dominating by expertise. The facilitator should acknowledge the contribution and thank the participant for sharing his or her expertise. Then the facilitator might ask a question or two to redirect the discussion, so the others don't have to feel like contributing would be competing with the expert in that particular area.

If the participant won't stop, the facilitator should interrupt—tactfully, of course: “Thanks, Bob. You obviously know a lot about this issue and we probably should have scheduled you to do a little presentation. However, we have only X minutes left for this item and we should allow everybody a chance to contribute.”

A participant is dominating by status. This situation is similar to the first. It may be prudent for the facilitator to pause slightly after the participant finishes, acknowledge the contribution, and then ask a question that shifts the direction of the discussion slightly, so that other members of the group don't feel obligated to follow up on that contribution. Otherwise, you can expect silence or comments in agreement.

A participant is dominating by eloquence. The facilitator should acknowledge the person—“Thank you for expressing your opinions/concerns so eloquently”—and then sum up the points. This straightforward summation breaks from the eloquence and may make the others feel less inadequate about joining the discussion. The facilitator may also want to ask a very specific question, to channel the flow of contributions.

A participant is dominating by personality. The facilitator can try reminding the participant that he or she should allow others to contribute. If a reminder isn't enough, the facilitator should circle the group, going around to each member in turn.

As a last resort, the facilitator should take personality out of the equation. A good way to do this is by having a “silent discussion.” He or she should hand out index cards to the members of the group and ask them to write their comments on the

issue or answers to a specific question that the facilitator puts on the flipchart. Then, the facilitator collects the cards and reads them aloud; the scribe takes notes. In this way, every member of the group gets an equal opportunity to participate. No index card ever dominated by personality.

Disruptive Behavior

A few members of the group are goofing around. The facilitator can ignore the behavior and assume that those involved will stop on their own or under pressure from their peers. He or she can also try asking them to settle down, in a kind, lighthearted way. The focus should be on what's better for the group, not on what the facilitator wants or what the rules specify—unless the “fun bunch” fails to respect the request. If there are a lot of people goofing around, it may be more effective to suggest a five-minute break, since it's likely that they're feeling overloaded or worn out.

Someone is telling jokes or otherwise trying to entertain. The facilitator should try something like “We appreciate a little humor, but we need all the time we have for the agenda.”

Someone who's disruptive won't calm down. As a last resort, the facilitator can call for a five-minute break. Then he or she should take the person aside, where they can talk one on one about what's behind the problem.

Negativity

A participant is critical about ideas and opinions expressed by other participants. The facilitator should deal with the negative comments, but frame them constructively, using affirmative language to phrase them as questions or suggestions. If, for example, the person complains about wasting time on a certain issue, the facilitator might say, “You seem to be wondering if we could deal with this issue more efficiently. Do you have any suggestions for doing this?” The tone should be positive and inviting, not challenging. The opportunity to offer suggestions may put an end to the negativity—or some good ideas may come of it.

A participant makes a contribution that the other members of the group dismiss or ignore. This reaction is what the authors of *The Team Handbook* label “discounts and flops” (p. 7-21).

They recommend that the facilitator support the participant and encourage discussion: e.g., “Anna, it seems like this point is important to you and we should give it some consideration” or “I believe that what Kati just said brings a new perspective that we should discuss.”

Emotions

Participants are becoming very emotional in their discussion.

It's good for members of a group to be passionate about their work; most managers complain about the opposite, apathy. However, emotions can easily get out of control and destroy the spirit of collaboration.

If the facilitator believes that emotions are running too high, he or she should propose a five-minute break. (It's better to lose a little time than to lose any chance of accomplishing anything for the rest of the meeting.) Then, after the break, he or she should reconstruct the content of the heated exchanges as dispassionately as possible.

If it seems that the participants are still feeling too emotional about the issue, the facilitator should propose continuing the discussion at the next meeting. If a majority of the members agree, it's settled.

If not, then it might be a wise tactic to move to a round robin discussion, where each member of the group gets a chance to state his or her view and give two key reasons in support. Nobody comments on any of the opinions and nobody argues. After the circle, the facilitator summarizes areas of agreement and disagreement and asks for ideas to address and reconcile the disagreements.

Conflict

Any activity involving a group of people may produce conflict. That's natural. The facilitator should not assume that conflict in



Bill of Rights—and Responsibilities

You may want to copy and distribute the following to all members of the group:

Rights and Responsibilities of Meeting Participants

- I have the right to feel respected—and the responsibility to help ensure that all members respect each other and feel respected.
- I have the right to feel comfortable—and the responsibility to help ensure that all members feel comfortable.
- I have the right to feel a sense of collaboration and cooperation—and the responsibility to help ensure that all members collaborate and cooperate.

a discussion is necessarily a negative consequence. Social scientists make a distinction between *objective* conflicts and *subjective* conflicts:

- *Objective* conflicts are over ideas and problems and suggestions for solutions.
- *Subjective* conflicts center on the people rather than the issues.

A conflict arises because of differences in opinion over an issue. It's probably an objective conflict, so it can be healthy for the group, which benefits from diverse perspectives. It may make the facilitator uncomfortable, but he or she should not try to end an objective conflict.

The danger of an objective conflict is that it could develop into a subjective conflict. So the facilitator should focus on keeping the conflict constructive and not allowing it to become personal. The facilitator should make sure that any conflict remains centered on the issue. If necessary, he or she should intervene to frame the conflict in objective, neutral, unemotional terms.



Objective conflict Discord over ideas and problems and suggestions for solutions, potentially healthy for the group.

Subjective conflict Discord centered on the people rather than the issues, potentially harmful for the group.

When a conflict arises, people outside the conflict generally tend to withdraw. That means that there might be less participation in general, as the protagonists in the conflict take over the meeting by their intense interaction. The facilitator should continue to encourage other members of the group to participate constructively. He or she should keep rephrasing “hot” comments in neutral, constructive terms and help all participants focus on the useful points raised.

Of course, if the facilitator senses that people are becoming uneasy about the conflict, he or she should intervene. Perhaps the most prudent course would be to hold up a hand toward each party in the universal “Stop!” gesture and then to sum up the positions—again, in objective, neutral, unemotional terms. An alternative—if the squabble has not gone too far—is to invite each party to phrase his or her position in 25 words.

When differences in opinion cause objective conflicts to become subjective, it often involves differences in values and/or preferences. The facilitator should try to keep the discussion focused on the issue, to minimize these differences.

It's possible to persuade conflicting participants



Timeout

When a conflict arises, participants who are not involved can feel uncomfortable, in large part because it may seem like the situation is out of control. It makes sense, then, to allow every member of the group a chance to exert control, just in case.

Explain at the first meeting, when the group sets its rules, and then repeat regularly at subsequent meetings, that any member of the group who feels at any time that a situation is getting out of control can call for a timeout. The signal is the two-handed signal used in sporting events, with hands open and flat, touching perpendicularly to form a T. Every meeting participant should know that it's his or her obligation to call a timeout, when necessary to help keep the meeting under control. When a timeout is called, the facilitator should announce a two-minute break. (It can be more or less, of course, at the discretion of the facilitator, according to the situation and the feelings of the group.)

to agree (either implicitly or explicitly) to work around their differences. It may be a matter of helping them to realize that those differences in values and/or preferences need not prevent them from working together. Or the facilitator can help them understand that for the good of the group they should put their energy into working together rather than fighting. When participants come together frequently for a significant purpose and experience success on joint goals, often relationships improve.

A conflict arises because of personality differences. The facilitator can attempt to cool the conflict by intervening decisively, saying something like “Could we all focus on the issues and not each other?”

Don’t expect your facilitator to deal with these subjective conflicts. If there are feuds among your employees, it’s your responsibility as manager to end them or at least to limit the effects they have on others and on meetings.

As mentioned toward the end of Chapter 2, you can reduce the potential for clashes caused by personality differences by talking with potentially contentious individuals prior to the meeting. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the facilitator can begin the meeting by setting a constructive tone, if he or she suspects that personality conflicts are likely or even possible.

In short, it’s up to the facilitator to deal with any problems that arise during the meeting, but it’s your job to manage any ongoing conflicts that members of the group bring to the meeting. At the very least, you should help the group set rules to prohibit personal attacks, so that your facilitator has some means of dealing with situations that arise from relationship problems that you cannot resolve.

People are quibbling about trivial matters. The facilitator should help the group let go of the details and focus on the big picture, on the objective for that agenda item. It probably won’t help to reprimand the group about wasting time, unless the facilitator is sure the participants are arguing about trivialities intentionally.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, no book can cover

Modes of Conflict

To help members of the group feel less discomfort when conflicts arise, you might share with them the following. (In addition, you could also have them take the inventory.)

How do we handle conflict? The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Inventory can help us better understand ways of dealing with conflict.

In the mid-1970s, Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann devised a system that plotted a matrix of five conflict modes, in terms of two axes: unassertive-assertive (our desire to satisfy our own concerns) and uncooperative-cooperative (our desire to satisfy others' concerns).

Their model shows that conflict-handling behaviors are neither good nor bad. We improve our ability to resolve conflicts when we understand our reactions and can choose the most effective behaviors for a particular situation.

Here, in brief, are the five modes plotted by Thomas and Kilmann:

- **Competing:** High assertive and low cooperative. The goal is to *win*.
- **Avoiding:** Low assertive and low cooperative. The goal is to *delay or avoid altogether*.
- **Compromising:** Moderate assertive and moderate cooperative. The goal is to *find a middle ground*.
- **Collaborating:** High assertive and high cooperative. The goal is to *find a win-win situation*.
- **Accommodating:** Low assertive and high cooperative. The goal is to *yield or go along*.

For information about this instrument, visit the Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. Web site, www.cpp-db.com, or contact the company: 3803 East Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303, phone: (800) 624-1765 or (650) 969-8901, fax: (650) 969-8608, e-mail: custserv@cpp-db.com.

all problem situations and no tactic can work every time. But the principles applied in this chapter should guide you in dealing with any other problems that arise.

And now, all that remains is to do a quick overview of how technology is changing the ways in which we meet.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 7

- ❑ Dealing with problems during a meeting is difficult—not necessarily because of the nature or severity of the problem, but because problems during a meeting are generally not your responsibility, but the responsibility of the facilitator. You should recommend that any person you select to be a facilitator read this chapter.
- ❑ Take preventive measures to reduce the chances of major problems. To reduce the possibility of problems resulting from personality conflicts, talk with participants one on one in advance of the meeting and then begin the meeting by reminding everyone to focus on the purposes of the meeting and act responsibly in the best interests of the group.
- ❑ For many situations that may arise during a meeting, the first and generally best remedy is the rules your group has set for its meetings, because your group developed them, by consensus, and they're appropriate to your environment and culture. The rules should specify how to deal with any violations.
- ❑ No book can cover all troublesome situations and no tactic can work every time. But the principles applied in this chapter should guide you in dealing with most problems.



Technological Tools and Meeting Virtually

This chapter is *about* technology—but it's not really *on* technology.

It won't tell you all about the specific technological tools you can use to meet in ways other than face to face, same time, same place. The tools change too quickly for any book to cover them at all adequately. In the weeks that it takes this chapter to go from my computer to the bookstores, the technological tools discussed here will change, perhaps significantly, or even dramatically.

Besides, there are thousands of sales reps who will be more than happy to tell you all about what their products and services can help you do. And, as you explore the possibilities of those technologies, a technician in your organization will be able to advise you on the technical requirements of any of these possibilities.

This chapter is about what you could be missing with those tools and how you can compensate.

What Makes a Meeting?

Technology is extending the concept of meetings as it expands the possibilities for communicating and collaborating. So, to start this final chapter, we return to the beginning of this book, to our definition of “meeting”: *an event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose.*

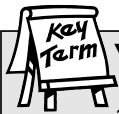
A systematic way to approach an overview of meeting technology is by considering the concept of meetings through the five W’s and one H: who? what? when? where? why? and how?

In our simple definition of “meeting,” the *people* are the *who*, the *content* is the *what*, and the *purpose* is the *why*. Those three dimensions are basic to any meeting. The remaining dimensions vary:

- The *where* is the location, an either/or situation: either one place or different places.
- The *when* is the time, another either/or: either one time or different times.
- The *how* is the methods and media (words and objects) used to communicate and collaborate, and the senses. (Technology is limited—so far!—to the eyes and the ears, so we talk in terms of *visual* and *aural*.)

The virtual meetings that technology allows still fit the basic definition of *meeting* as an event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose. (At least the common definition of *event* as “an occurrence, a social occasion or activity,” although not the more specific and scientific definition in Merriam-Webster—“the fundamental entity of observed physical reality represented by a point designated by three coordinates of place and one of time in the space-time continuum postulated by the theory of relativity.” Whew!) But by changing the dimensions of the events, the technology challenges us to think differently about our meetings.

Technology frees us from the necessity of meeting in one place. It can also free us from the necessity of meeting at one



Virtual “Being in essence or effect but not in fact,” according to dictionaries published before the cyber boom. A virtual meeting is communication and collaboration involving two or more people who are not present in the same physical place and/or at the same time.

time. It allows visual communication and collaboration, through text and through images (still and moving). It allows aural communication and collaboration, through words and through sounds. So we’ll discuss technologies in terms of visual and/or

aural and in terms of synchronous or asynchronous.

Some technologies can be used either synchronously or asynchronously, while others are either the former or the latter. (A funny thing about time: since it’s a continuum of moments,



Synchronous Pertaining to interactions that happen more or less simultaneously, in real time.

“Real time” has become a buzzword of uncertain but positive meaning. (Who wouldn’t want the real thing, rather than ... what? Fake time? Unreal time?) For example, there’s now a sports utility vehicle that features “real-time” four-wheel drive.

Asynchronous Pertaining to interactions that happen at different times. An asynchronous system does not place time constraints on its users. It allows “serial meetings.”

there’s not necessarily a real delineation between *synchronous* and *asynchronous*. If I send you an e-mail message and you reply within minutes of receiving it, our exchange is not synchronous, yet it’s practically so. If we’re using instant messaging and I step away from my computer to use the rest room, get a cup of coffee, check my mail, and chat for a few moments with a colleague in the hallway, by the time I get back to

you, is our messaging still instant—synchronous?)

In any discussion of technology, you can be overwhelmed by all of the features and the promises. To understand what all of it means and, much more important, what it can mean to *you*, think in terms of the following three factors:

- What freedom the tools bring
- What you sacrifice for that freedom
- How you can compensate for those sacrifices

You're probably already using technology for virtual meetings, in some way. A phone conversation—one on one or conference call—can be a virtual meeting (aural, synchronous, and at a distance). An exchange of faxes can be a virtual meeting (visual, synchronous or asynchronous, and at a distance).

Virtual Meetings

The Internet and information technology facilitate people meeting when they're physically in different places.

Advantages

You're probably familiar with the advantages of virtual meetings, because the companies that produce and promote the many tools used for virtual meetings vie with each other to tout those advantages.

A major advantage—often cited first, at least by marketers and sales reps—is money. Virtual meetings are usually less expensive than face-to-face meetings:

- They eliminate the costs of travel, accommodations, and meals.
- They minimize the inconvenience of interrupting work.
- They reduce the loss of time and thus productivity.

Another major advantage is that virtual meetings can bring together people who are separated by space or time, such as employees who work in several locations and/or at different times.

There are also advantages that are harder to quantify or even to prove. Some claim that virtual meetings sharpen the sense of purpose, because they generally require more focus and more discipline. It could be argued that they do so to the extent that they reduce the opportunity for socializing. It's also



First, Come to Terms with the Terms

When discussing any technology with colleagues, your organization's tech staff, or vendors, make sure from the start that you're all understanding the terms in the same way. You may feel confused, but even the experts don't agree on what all of the terms mean specifically.

As we'll discuss later, terms like *teleconference*, *e-conference*, *Web conference*, and *multimedia conference* can have various meanings. Make sure you're not discussing apples and oranges or you may end up with a high-tech version of fruit salad.

claimed that virtual meetings can increase objectivity, because each participant feels the presence of others in the group less than in a face-to-face meeting. That benefit would be greatest with technologies that connect with words and asynchronously and least with video conferencing.

Disadvantages

On the other hand, you may not be aware of the disadvantages of virtual meetings. The most obvious disadvantage of virtual meetings is that they're not face-to-face: there's something missing or at least different in any technology, which means that both the possibilities, and the group, and individual dynamics are different.

Virtual meetings can work well for smaller groups, but they're more difficult if there are more participants. What size is optimal? What size is the maximum? That depends on the technology, of course, but also on the culture of the work environment and the dynamics of the participants. The greatest difficulty is using interactive techniques in a virtual meeting—the techniques presented in Chapter 6, and breaking into groups of two or three, for example.

Each technology presents different challenges, many of which we'll discuss in the following sections, as we outline the basic technologies for meeting virtually.

Audio Conferencing

Also known as a *conference call*, an audio conference connects three or more people by telephone or through the Internet.

The primary advantages of an audio conference are that it saves time and money, it's relatively simple to set up, and it's easy for people unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with newer technology. It's an effective way to meet when there's no need to share visual materials or when the materials have already been shared through some other means, such as by e-mail, fax, or delivery service.

Preparation

E-mail or fax the agenda and send any other materials in advance.

Emphasize the importance of preparing. Pauses that would seem natural and normal in a face-to-face meeting can seem very long when the interaction of participants is aural only.

Emphasize that all participants must be ready to begin the conference on time. Ask remote participants to connect five minutes before the scheduled start time. If any participants are in different time zones, state the start time in all the relevant time zones, so there are no misunderstandings.

Allow in your agenda for a possible late start and delays due to technological problems as well as for a different "feeling of community" among participants.

Take precautions to keep your location quiet and free from distractions and interruptions. Remind all remote participants to do the same. Noises can divert attention and even be confusing when your only contact is aural. Side conversations can disrupt any meeting, but they're definitely to be discouraged when audio conferencing.

If any site is using a speakerphone, test the acoustics of the room to make sure that all participants are coming through loud and clear and that there are no echoes or other disruptive sounds.

Meeting

Start by asking each participant to identify himself or herself and—if any of the participants do not know each other—to explain briefly why he or she is involved in the meeting. This helps create a feeling of community and sets the tone for the meeting. It's also a good way to test the quality of the audio—far better than repeating, “Testing, 1, 2, 3” again and again, because it invites the participants to think about the people, rather than focus on the technology.

It's a good idea to post the names of all participants and their locations on a flipchart at each location, to create a “map” of the group. People who will be meeting together over a period of time can send photos of themselves, so there's also a visual sense.

After you review the agenda and objectives, establish guidelines for audio conferencing, such as the following:

- Identify yourself when you start to speak; e.g., “Pat Ohura, from Production, in Kalamazoo”—whatever it takes so that participants at other sites know who's talking.
- Pause from time to time to allow questions or other reactions—or just so others can take notes.
- Keep your contributions brief. If others want to know more, they'll ask.
- If you point to something on any materials, such as charts or handouts, specify what you're indicating.
- Imagine that the room is totally dark or your eyes are closed. That's how you're coming through to remote participants: if they can't hear it, you're not communicating it.

The facilitator should try to involve all participants and make it clear who should contribute when. It may be necessary to direct questions and comments to specific individuals or at least specific locations, for two reasons. First, without any visual cues, participants are likely to hesitate to contribute. Second, without visual cues, it's more likely that more than one participant at a time will start talking.

Somebody at each site should explain any actions or silence

at that location: e.g., “Pam is writing the ideas on a flipchart and Todd is taking notes, which he’ll fax to you during the break,” or “The silence here is all of us pondering that question.”

At the end of the meeting, the participants should evaluate it. What worked? How could the meeting process be improved?

Follow-up

After the audio conference, use e-mail or fax to distribute the minutes and to encourage participants to ask any questions or share any concerns. If not all members of the group have access to computers, use alternative channels for communication.

Make available (on the organization’s intranet or in the library) any records of the meeting—any presentations, audiotapes, videotapes, and so forth.

Set up a discussion list to allow further exploration of issues raised during the audio conference.

E-mail

Electronic mail is ideal for making announcements, sharing information, and eliciting opinions. It’s also practical for serial meetings, in which participants can exchange information, opinions, suggestions, and so forth over a period of time. In fact, for some topics a discussion by e-mail might be more appropriate than a brief one-hour meeting, because an e-mail discussion allows participants more time to think and to consult resources.

An e-mail message will usually consist primarily of text, but it’s possible to attach files to the messages, allowing participants to share documents, images, graphics, audio, and video—if each has the software to open the files.

Why Meet?

The Wharton Center for Applied Research reported in *The Wall Street Journal* that senior and middle managers said only 56% of meetings were productive and that phone calls, memos, e-mails, or voice mails could have replaced over 25% of the meetings. What would the percentage be in your organization, in your unit?



E-mail is fast—sometimes almost synchronous. It's convenient. It's inexpensive. The technology is almost universal and simple to use. Also, e-mail may encourage people to be more candid, because they can't see the others to whom they're sending their messages.

Unlike synchronous means of communication, it allows people time to think. This may be an advantage particularly for people who are introverts or who are less at ease when they feel pressured to act quickly.

Each participant has a copy of every contribution—although sometimes messages can become so long and involved with replies that it's difficult to sort out the pieces. That's why it's useful to establish a protocol, such as the following:

- Keep contributions short, focused on one issue at a time.
- Identify the issue in your subject line.
- Begin each e-mail with your name, so it's easy to know immediately who's saying what.
- Put your contribution at the top of your e-mail, not inserted into previous texts.
- Make contributions easy to read: short sentences, short paragraphs.

Since e-mail has become so essential to most people in business, there's generally no need to explain how to use this technology. However, even experienced users will occasionally make mistakes, such as using "Reply" rather than "Reply All" or neglecting to identify the subject appropriately.

There are other potential problems. Do all members of the group have access to computers? If not, then make sure that you're also using alternative channels for communication. Technology should help us expand opportunities for collaboration, not exclude people or make them feel marginalized.

Bear in mind, too, that not all people who have e-mail accounts check their e-mail regularly. Because the technology allows almost instantaneous exchanges, that's what we expect, so it can be frustrating meeting by e-mail with people who check

their inboxes only a few times during the day or who take a long time to reply. It's important, then, to start serial meetings by expressing expectations, e.g., "Since we'd like to take care of this issue within the next day or two, please check your e-mail every hour or so and reply to messages as quickly as possible."

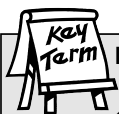
E-mail discussions also make it easier for members of the group to participate passively: they may read every e-mail they receive, but send out few or none. The facilitator may want to send out occasional reminders to encourage the quiet members to get involved in the exchange.

Of course, there will also be members who will be very active, pouncing on the keyboard to reply to every e-mail received. Here again, the facilitator may want to remind the group about the need to allow all members to participate.

Emphasize that participants should make their messages short and to the point, so it shouldn't take long to read messages or to reply to them. They should also refrain from trying to deal with a lot of points in a single e-mail, just as they would refrain from doing so in a conventional meeting. And they should specify the subject of each e-mail they send—and adjust the subject as the discussion changes direction.

Point out that participants who don't check their inboxes frequently may suddenly find themselves overwhelmed by messages if a discussion generates a lot of interest. Arrange e-mail meetings by phone, if you suspect that any participants might not be checking their e-mail inboxes frequently and so might miss a meeting entirely.

Another disadvantage of e-mail is that it depends on words and files to communicate: we cannot convey or support our messages with voice tones and inflections, facial expressions, or body language. You could compensate somewhat for this disadvantage by encouraging participants to use *emoticons* and acronyms to supplement their words. But avoid complicating communication with an abundance of these artificial conventions. Suggest that participants use capital letters to emphasize words or phrases—but no more than that or it's interpreted as shouting.



Emoticon Any of a variety of little faces formed from combinations of characters. The faces are created horizontally, to be appreciated by tilting your head to the left.

Emoticons—the word is short for “emotional icons”—developed as a means of making text more expressive. They are sometimes called *smileys*, because the most basic is a smiling face: :) or :-)

Here are some common emoticons:

- :) I'm smiling
- :D I've got a big smile
- :(I'm sad
- :|| I'm angry
- :/ or :\ I'm perplexed
- :O I'm surprised
- ;) I'm winking at you (joking)
- :P I'm sticking out my tongue at you

Some people have trouble expressing themselves in writing, especially with the concession that we expect in e-mail. This may cause participants to take longer to reply to messages or they may even refrain from contributing. If you suspect

that this could be a problem for any member of the group, you should emphasize that what matters is *substance*, not *style*.

E-mail provides a great way to follow up after meetings. If handouts are distributed at a meeting, participants can ask any questions or express other reaction by e-mail. Answer their questions as soon as possible and take note of any concerns, for the next meeting.



Keeping It Short

E-mail has developed a vocabulary of acronyms, some of which can sometimes puzzle even the experienced e-mailer. Here are some you might encounter in business e-mail (in caps or, often, in lower case):

- BTW: by the way
- IMHO: in my humble opinion
- F2F: face to face
- TIA: thanks in advance
- BG: big grin
- LOL: laughing out loud

It's generally best to avoid using acronyms, since the recipient may not understand and/or may consider them unprofessional.

Discussion Lists

A discussion list is a community connected by a program that distributes every e-mail from any subscriber (member of the group) to every other subscriber, automatically. This is a convenient way of creating a forum for meetings, with two advantages over e-mail:

- It allows for archiving all messages automatically, which can be useful for later reference.
- It allows for adding people to the group at any time, because they can catch up on what has happened earlier.

As with e-mail, discussion groups can make it easier for meeting participants to contribute because they have time to organize their thoughts and express them more carefully. This is usually an advantage, especially for people who have trouble with language or who are not native users of English.

It takes a little effort to set up a discussion list, so it makes sense primarily for ongoing project work. If your organization is networked, your tech expert can set up a list with the appropriate software and ensure protection against viruses. If not, there are numerous Web sites through which you can create discussions lists.

To Moderate or Not to Moderate?

Discussion lists can be set up as either *moderated* or *unmoderated*. A moderated list requires human intervention for every e-mail, to allow it to be posted as sent, to modify and then post it, or to delete it. That intervention can keep the discussion focused and prevent it from digressing or becoming too heated and/or too personal. Moderation obviously can require a lot of time—and it should not be necessary if you trust the members of the group to be responsible. If the group sets some ground rules, which can be appended automatically to every e-mail as a reminder, or posted regularly, there should be no need to moderate the discussion. If there are problems, you should be able to intervene with a post to remind participants of the focus of the discussion and the ground rules. In other words, moderate only as needed.



Still Images and Documents: Faxes and Files

Fax is still the most widely preferred way to send images. The major disadvantage in terms of meetings, at least for collaboration, is that outputs from fax machines cannot be modified. Also, the quality is often very poor.

If you want recipients to be able to modify still images, the best bet is to send graphic files as e-mail attachments. Of course, it's necessary to send it in a format that can be altered and to make sure that any recipients have the appropriate software to alter the files.

Also, make sure that all recipients can receive attachments—and that they know the maximum size allowed. If your files are too big, a compression program (such as WinZip) may reduce them to an acceptable size. Of course, your recipients need to have the same program or one that's compatible to restore the files to their original format.

As a last resort, you may need to save the files to a CD and send it by mail—which can take a lot of time and effort, especially if there are more than a few people collaborating and/or they're spread out across borders.

There are other disadvantages to collaborating through e-mail attachments:

- Sending large attachments can take a long time, especially with dialup connections.
- When any member of the group modifies a document, that version needs to be sent to all members.
- If two or more members of the group modify the same document at the same time, somebody must merge the changes into a single version manually.

If your meetings involve much modification of files, data conferencing would be a better way.

Teleconferencing

Teleconferencing is distance conferencing, interactive communi-

Beware of Teleconference

Teleconference is another term for which you need to establish a common understanding before you discuss teleconferencing with anyone.

Some people use the term to mean a conference call or an audio conference. Others understand it as a general term for distance conferencing, encompassing video conferencing, audio conferencing, and data conferencing.

In the latter sense, some people will also use the terms *Web conferencing* and *e-conferencing* as roughly synonymous with teleconferencing—although *Web conferencing* is also used as synonymous with *data conferencing*.

Confusing?



cation among three or more people who are separated geographically. It's a generic term that encompasses various technologies and applications, primarily the following:

- Audio conferencing
- Data conferencing
- Video conferencing

We've already discussed audio conferencing. We'll cover data conferencing next and then video conferencing. But first, we should mention two points.

The term *multimedia conferencing* is also used when a teleconference involves three or more types of technologies. This term, however, is more promotional than descriptive.

There's yet another term that's used for some forms of teleconferencing—*Web conferencing*. This term, as you would assume, refers to any type of conferencing—audio, data, video—over the Web. Here again, the use of this term is not universal, so don't discuss Web conferencing with anybody without first reaching agreement on what you'll mean by it.

Data Conferencing

Data conferencing allows participants to share applications. This means that they can collaborate on whiteboards, spread-

sheets, word processing programs, graphics programs, and other tools to work on projections, budgets, reports, diagrams, designs, and so forth. These applications are generally supplemented by at least an audio connection, whether by phone or more advanced technology.

Preparation

Understand the collaboration package and applications. That just seems like common sense. But whoever will be running the meeting—you, a facilitator, a resident expert on the specific applications—should get enough training and guidance to not only know the ins and outs of the application but also feel confident using them. It's one thing to use an applications by yourself in your office and quite another to use it in data conferencing.

Determine who will control the technology. It's possible to set up a data conference so that more than one participant can use an application at one time. However, it can easily get confusing for the participants and challenging for the facilitator if several people are contributing simultaneously—drawing on a whiteboard, changing figures in a spreadsheet, or editing a document. It may work better, at least until the group becomes familiar with data conferencing, for one person to control the application and for participants to make suggestions. Another possibility, particularly when graphics are involved and it's more difficult for participants to explain suggestions than to simply show what they mean, is for the facilitator to direct traffic, indicating which participant will control the application at any point in the meeting.

As the host, the facilitator has ultimate control over how and when the application is shared. He or she should know which key allows participants to access an application and which key restricts access.

As with audio conferencing, emphasize that all participants must be ready to begin on time. Because the technology is more involved, you may want remote participants to connect 10 minutes before the scheduled start time. (There may be

some challenges dealing with firewalls, for example.)

Have a technician on hand, at least for your first few data conferences. At the least, have the names and phone and pager numbers of people to contact in the event of technical problems.

Save meeting time by loading the application and the appropriate file(s) before making the connection. This shows that you're prepared to start the meeting immediately.

Meeting

The best way to ensure a successful, productive data conference is for the facilitator to be familiar and comfortable with the applications that the group is using.

The facilitator should make it clear from the start how the group will use the application(s), as determined above, under "Preparation." He or she should explain how members are to participate—by using keyboard or mouse or by guiding the facilitator. If participants are allowed to control an application, the facilitator should not hesitate to take control if collaboration becomes chaotic.

Anybody who works with an application should move a little more slowly than usual, make gestures that are more deliberate, and explain carefully what he or she is doing. Allow time for remote participants to ask questions or make suggestions. Unless all locations involved in the conference have very high-bandwidth Internet connections, response time can be slow.

At the end of the data conference, the participants should evaluate the meeting. What worked, in terms of the process? What suggestions would they make to improve data conferences?



Firewall A system—hardware, software, or a combination—designed to prevent unauthorized access to or from a private network. All messages entering or leaving the network pass through the firewall, which screens them according to specified security criteria and blocks those that do not meet the criteria.



Bandwidth A measure of the transmission capacity of a communications channel.

The higher the bandwidth, the more information the channel can carry. Bandwidth is most accurately measured in cycles per second (hertz or Hz), but it's also common to use bits per second (bps) or bytes per second instead. High bandwidth means faster and higher-quality teleconferencing.

Follow-up

Follow up the data conference by making available the final version of any files created or modified during the conference. The collaboration software should have file transfer capabilities. If not, you can e-mail the files.

Encourage participants to ask any questions or share any concerns (especially if any members of the group were unable or unwilling to participate actively). Use alternative channels for communication if any participants don't have easy access to a computer.

Consider setting up a discussion list so participants can continue to ask questions and make suggestions asynchronously.

Video Conferencing

In its simplest form, video conferencing is the synchronous connection of people in two or more locations using some combination of video, audio, and often data to communicate.

Preparation

Video conferencing brings you the closest to the experience of a conventional meeting. However, because of the technology and because participants may not be familiar and comfortable with using it, video conferences require more planning and preparation than other types of meetings discussed so far. (You should review the earlier suggestions on preparing for audio conferences.) Also, the closer the capabilities of any virtual meeting to the look and feel of a same-place, same-time meeting, the easier it is to forget about compensating for the differences—however slight.

It's even more important with video conferences than with conventional meetings to minimize the number of participants. One suggestion is to limit the number at any location to eight,

unless the video conference consists solely of a presentation. It's also generally wise to keep video conferences narrower in scope and shorter than conventional meetings because of the greater difficulty of maintaining attention, keeping up energy, and staying focused.

Prepare the participants by distributing the agenda and any materials far in advance and providing instructions in writing. Share with participants the tips listed below, under "Performance."

Have a technician on hand, at least for your first few video conferences. If that's not possible, have the names and phone and pager numbers of people to contact in the event of technical problems.

It's important to prepare the room for a conventional meeting. For a video conference, it's even more important—and obviously involves more thought and effort.

First, position the camera. Generally it's best to put it close to the monitor, either on top or directly to the side, so it appears as if participants on site are looking directly at remote participants. Don't point the camera toward the door or any window where there might be movements that could be distracting to the viewers.

Next, set the camera to output to the monitor. That will allow you to view your site from the perspective of remote participants.

Make sure that lighting is at least adequate, especially between the camera and the participants' faces. If overhead lighting is insufficient or unbalanced, it may help to place a desk lamp near the monitor to compensate. Turn off any bright lights in the background, close the blinds or curtains on any outside windows if it's sunny, and cover any reflective surfaces.

Clean up the site. Get rid of any items within camera range that might make the site seem cluttered. Remove anything that could distract or offend.

Arrange seating so that all participants can be seen easily by remote viewers and can feel comfortable working together.

Use individual microphones, if possible, for equal sound quality. If you use a table mike, position it the optimal distance from all, according to the manufacturer's instructions, so participants don't have to move to speak.

Hold up any visuals (charts, graphs, etc.) in front of the camera, so you know how to position them to allow remote participants to see them clearly and easily.

Finally, after you've arranged lighting, background, seating, audio equipment, and positioning of any visuals, set the monitor so participants on site can see their remote co-participants.

Now you're ready!

Meeting

Here are some suggestions for making your video conference as much like a "normal" meeting as possible.

- Address the screen as if it were another participant seated in the room. Don't stare. Make eye contact with participants on site, not just remote participants.
- Speak in a normal volume, a little more slowly, and as clearly as possible.
- Avoid making any noises that the microphone(s) might pick up. If you're using table mikes, refrain from rustling papers, tapping your pen, and other unnecessary sounds. What if you have to cough, sneeze, or burp? If you have a table mike, lean away from it. If you have a lapel, lavalier, or headset mike, cover it up.

At the end of the video conference, the participants should evaluate the meeting. What worked? How could the meeting process be improved?

Follow-up

Follow up the video conference by e-mailing or faxing the meeting notes and action items. Encourage participants to ask any questions or share any concerns (especially participants who were inhibited by the technology). If not all members of the



No Panacea

Marty Morrow, CEO of Quovix, a company that “builds networked collaborative communities,” summed up the technology science concisely (*Darwin* magazine, November 16, 2001):

There must be over 1000 software vendors selling “collaboration tools” at this point. Everything including email, Instant Messaging, VideoConferencing, Virtual Whiteboarding, Project Rooms, Portal Strategies—all selling themselves as *the* solution to a company’s collaboration needs.... The tools are 20% (or less) of the problem you’re trying to solve.

Keep that final thought in mind as you explore technology for meetings.

group have access to computers, use alternative channels for communication.

Make available (on the organization’s intranet or in the library) any records of the meeting—any presentations, audiotapes, videotapes, and so forth.

Consider setting up a discussion list so participants can continue to ask questions and make suggestions asynchronously.

Conclusion

This chapter could be much longer and provide much more detail about these technologies. But what matters most at this point you won’t find in a book.

You need to consider your employees and any others you would involve in virtual meetings. Are they ready? Do they have enough experience and confidence with technology that they could soon be using it as easily and comfortably as they now use flipcharts and tangible whiteboards? Sales reps and technicians will talk about *requirements* for an application or a system, but the requirements that you should consider above all are the psychological, emotional, and social requirements of your employees. What do they need in order to meet virtually? The answers to these questions are not on a Web site or in a brochure or manual. They’re in what you know about your

employees and the culture of your workplace. They're in the potential that you recognize in your employees and in yourself.

Before you start exploring technology for virtual meetings, you should at least skim *CyberMeetings: How to Link People and Technology in Your Organization* by James L. Creighton and James W. R. Adams (New York: AMACOM, 1998), probably the one best book on the subject of this chapter.

Then, to find out more about any of the technologies mentioned in this chapter, just enter the name into your favorite search engine and check out the sites it finds. If any of the technologies appeals to you, talk with some sales reps. But be prepared to be overwhelmed by the possibilities—and keep in mind that no technology will guarantee better meetings—or even meetings that are as good.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 8

- ☐ Our definition of “meeting” is *an event consisting of people, content, and process for a purpose*. Technology is extending the concept of meetings as it expands the possibilities for communicating and collaborating.
- ☐ Virtual meetings are usually less expensive than face-to-face meetings: they eliminate the costs of travel, accommodations, and meals; they minimize the inconvenience of interrupting work; and they reduce the loss of time and thus productivity. In addition, they can bring together people who are separated by space or time.
- ☐ Virtual meetings have various disadvantages, depending on the technology and the specific situation. The most obvious disadvantage is that they're not face-to-face: there's something missing or at least different in any technology, so group and individual dynamics are different.
- ☐ Sales reps and technicians will talk about *requirements* for an application or a system, but the requirements that you should consider above all are the psychological, emotional, and social requirements of your employees.

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